

Abducted
by the Highland
Pirate

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Abducted by the Highland Pirate

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Prologue

Chapter 1

Prologue

Jamie's mother wiped crumbs of cheese away from the corner of his mouth, giggling as she did so.

"Ye're like a squirrel, Jamie, always storing things for later," she said, her voice light and melodic. She poured him a cup of water and urged him to wash down his dinner. Jamie was young, but he could tell that there was something on her mind. She glanced urgently at the door.

"Where is Da?" Jamie asked, feeling the cool refreshment trickle down his throat. He licked his lips to see if there were any errant crumbs that his mother had missed, but she had wiped him completely clean.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon. He haes tae meet someone important." Jamie could see the anxiety in his eyes, but he was not yet old enough to understand their meaning. For now, he accepted her explanation and simply nodded. Still, it was strange for his father not to be home. Usually, he was always at home by the time the sun came down, ready to join the family for dinner. Jamie didn't understand why his father had to spend so much time away from home. His mother had tried to explain it by saying that coin needed to be earned, and Jamie found himself wishing that he could forget all about money. It seemed like a horrid thing. If money weren't around, then there would be no need for his father to work, and they could be together all the time.

"I thought *we* were important," Jamie said.

His mother stopped what she was doing and came to him, cupping his cheeks in her hand.

"Ye are important, Jamie. Ye're the most important thing in the world. Never let yerself forget that. It's just that sometimes... sometimes life is like the wind and the sea."

“What dae ye mean?” Jamie asked, scrunching his face up in confusion.

His mother let her head drop. Fine strands of auburn hair fell across her face like a veil, and for a moment, he was overwhelmed by the sadness that was in her eyes.

“It’s unpredictable, ye know, but if ye trust in them, they will carry ye somewhere wonderful. It’s important to trust these things. Ye can never tame them, but if ye’re kind tae them, then they’ll be kind tae ye as well. Life is the same way. Sometimes things happen that ye cannae control, but if ye’re patient and ye stay calm, then things will always work out for the best.”

She kissed Jamie on the forehead, a long, lingering kiss that was filled with something like sadness. Jamie wasn’t sure he understood what she was trying to tell him. It seemed important, yet his mind was too young to grasp the deeper meaning. He didn’t have a chance to ask her anything else either because at that point, the door burst open, and his father came charging in. His face was ruddy, and his temples glistened with sweat. His voice was frantic, and although Jamie was young, he could tell that the smile his father wore was a false one.

He ruffled Jamie’s hair and then took his wife aside. They spoke in low voices, so Jamie could not understand what they were saying. But he saw the crestfallen look on his mother’s face and the way she looked at Jamie with abject horror. His father squeezed her hands and said something else, something about being strong. Jamie didn’t understand what was happening or why his father hadn’t returned with his sister.

“Where’s—” Jamie started to ask, but before he could finish the question, his father replied.

“She’s somewhere safe. Believe me. I know that this is going to be difficult for you to understand, but we will be a family again. She just needs to be safe for a while, and we need to be safe too. We’ll see her again soon.”

His mother fell to her knees and wrapped her hand around the back of his head. “Jamie, ye remember what I just told ye about the wind? Well, the wind is blowing, and it’s going to take us somewhere new. I dinnae know where yet, but we’re going tae be taegether. As long as we’re taegether, everything is going tae be well,” she said. He noticed the way she tried to keep her voice from trembling. She failed.

His father was gathering things in a bag. “Gae upstairs and fetch anything ye want tae take with ye. Make sure ye take anything valuable, and only things that ye can carry. Hurry,” she said, pushing him away. She turned, and he heard raised voices as he scurried upstairs.

Floorboards creaked under his feet as he made his way to his room and looked around. A window was open, and the wind blew through. Jamie started to gather his things when he heard a hammering on the door. He left his room and peered down the staircase only to see his father running, trying to stop the door from opening.

He was too late.

Two ugly men stood there in dirty cloaks, scowling at his father. His father held up his hands and shook his head, pleading to them. Then his mother entered the scene, and she rebuked these strangers. But they did not care. There was a flash and a cry, and then his parents slumped to the floor. Jamie bit his tongue as hot tears welled up in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. He kept to the shadows, knowing that any noise he made would only have alerted these villains to his presence. His parents had taught him well.

The villains laughed as they left, disappearing into the shadows of the night, having stripped the deceased of all their valuable jewelry. They weren’t fools enough to stay around and ransack the entire house, though.

Jamie’s vision was blurred as he staggered down the stairs, almost tumbling to his parents’ bodies. He pressed his hands against them and tried to get them to move. Their heads lolled, and their eyes were empty. Gone was the warmth of his mother’s tender touch. Gone was the usual good cheer of his father’s smile. Warm, sticky blood pooled underneath their bodies as the life continued to leave them. Jamie crumbled and lay upon them, wailing like a banshee as his young heart broke, the innocence being stripped from him before he ever had a chance to grow up. Anger and vengeance began to swirl within his heart. The villains hadn’t only killed his parents, but with their jabbing daggers, they had killed the child within him as well.

The wind blew through the open door, but he could not find any comfort in it at all. He returned upstairs and looked in the empty crib, wondering where his sister was. He understood now why his father had taken her away. At least she was safe, but it meant that he had no

family at all, and this place could not be a home for him any longer.

He clenched his jaw as he walked out of the door and disappeared into the night, vowing that he would find whoever was responsible for this and make him pay.

S*everal years later...*

The Montgomery sisters were sitting in their drawing room. It was a pleasant day so they had the window open, and a light breeze drifted in, bringing with it all the lovely scents of the outside world. Hollie was the eldest, although, in the eyes of the world, she was still a young girl, only now taking the first steps into maturity. Her hair was the shade of an oak tree, her lips like two petals, and her face was as pale and beautiful as the moon. But her eyes sparkled with fire, and they were eyes that held the wisdom of a woman far older than Hollie's years. Anna was Hollie's younger sister. She was seventeen and the thinnest of the three sisters. Her hair was straight, while Hollie's bounced down in waves. Anna had thin lips and held herself rigidly, as though some disaster was going to occur if she ever let her posture slip. Charlotte was the youngest at fifteen, and perhaps because of this, she was the loudest too. Unlike her other sisters, she had blonde hair, which was a precious gift she had inherited from their mother, who was sadly deceased. Hollie and Anna both favored their father, the venerable Allan Montgomery.

"We have gifts for ye, Hollie," Charlotte said with a wide smile.

"Gifts? For me? Ye should nae hae done this. A firm farewell is gift enough, and I'm sure that I will receive many gifts once I am married," Hollie replied, her eyes sparkling like sapphires.

"We thought ye should have gifts from the people who know ye best," Anna said in a slightly haughty tone. "And I hope that they will provide a good use for ye. I'm sure that the gifts ye'll receive at yer wedding will be pretty things like jewelry and gems. We wanted tae give ye something that matters," she continued with disdain in her voice.

Hollie smiled. Anna took pride in her plainness, as though things of beauty held no allure for her. Hollie had assumed that at some point Anna would grow out of this, but she had long since given up trying to change Anna. She wouldn't have the opportunity after this anyway. A flicker of sorrow flared inside her, which she pushed away quickly. Marrying was a joyous occasion, and she was sure that any sadness would be swiftly forgotten once she was standing beside her new husband.

"Well, ye wanted tae," Charlotte said, "and like a fool, I agreed. But I hope that ye will enjoy our small offerings. I think that ye should gae first, Anna, sae that I can make up for whatever disappointment ye give her."

Anna scowled at Charlotte. For a moment, Hollie thought she was going to have to make peace between them, but thankfully, they were not going to make her last hours at home difficult ones.

"I'll gae first because I choose tae," Anna said.

Hollie caught Charlotte smirking. Anna held out something that was wrapped in cloth. With Anna, it wasn't difficult to figure out what she had prepared. Everything with Anna was about books, and she wrongly assumed that everyone liked books as much as she did. Hollie feigned enthusiasm as she unwrapped the cloth.

"What a surprise," Charlotte said, rolling her eyes.

"It's lovely," Hollie said, placing emphasis on her words so that Anna wouldn't feel self-conscious.

"It's a book about how ladies should conduct themselves. I thought it would be very helpful considering there are going tae be lots of new rules tae follow, and the fact that we...we never haed anyone tae teach us..." Her words faltered, and each of the girls bowed their heads. Sorrow flashed through their minds as they remembered their mother.

"It is lovely, Anna, and very thoughtful. Thank ye sae much," Hollie said, bowing her head in thanks. Then she turned to Charlotte. Charlotte's gift was wrapped in cloth as well, although it was much smaller than Anna's. Hollie peeled the cloth away, revealing a small vial that was filled with an opaque liquid.

"What is it?" Hollie gasped as she lifted the vial and peered at it.

"I thought we were supposed to get useful things, not pretty things," Anna asked in a harsh whisper, narrowing her eyes at

Charlotte.

“Sometimes things can be pretty *and* useful,” Charlotte said with a grin, rocking back and forth on her chair. “Its perfume, Hollie. I thought that it might be worth using on yer wedding day. They dae say that sometimes a scent can be like a magical potion, and I thought it might help make ye even more beautiful tae yer new husband. Gae on, smell it.”

Hollie opened the vial and wafted it before her nose, breathing in the deep, sweet scent. It smelled so good it was as though the air danced before her, and she found it quite intoxicating.

“It’s heavenly,” she whispered.

Charlotte clapped her hands together, and her grin widened.

She beamed. “I think we know who is best at getting presents.”

“Yes, well, that vial is going tae run out one day while the wisdom in that book is going tae last forever.” Anna folded her arms across her chest and looked away.

“I like both of these presents equally,” Hollie said diplomatically, “and I will cherish them when I leave. I’m glad that I can take a part of ye with me. I am going tae miss ye sae much,” she said, her words beginning to waver as emotions overwhelmed her. She had tried to resist giving in to her feelings for so long, but now they were bursting through her in a torrent. She reached out a hand and clasped her sister’s hands, squeezing them tightly. She might be leaving, but there would always be a bond between them that could never be broken.

“I have a gift for ye as well,” a deep, sonorous voice filled the room. The girls looked up and saw their father standing in the doorway. He wore a smile and came to sit with them, kissing each of them on the head before settling beside Hollie. “I know that this isn’t easy for ye, and it’s going tae take some time tae adjust tae yer new surroundings, but I wanted ye tae be able tae take a little piece of home with ye, sae I wanted tae give ye this.”

Allan brought a hand from behind his back. What he held wasn’t shrouded in a cloth, so the gleaming beauty of it was apparent to each of the girls. Hollie’s eyes went wide as she took the item of jewelry from him. It was a hair clip, bedecked in tiny crystals that caught the light from any angle, making it seem as though it was alive. She traced her fingers across the smooth gems, and the breath rushed out of her parted lips.

"It's beautiful," she gasped.

"It was yer mother's," Allan said, and the girls all looked reverentially at it. "I know that it's a tragedy she can't give it tae ye herself. There's nothing she would have wanted more than tae be here tae offer this tae ye, along with some words of wisdom, I'm sure, but, well, it's the least I could dae. I know it's a mere trinket, but—"

"It's wonderful, Father. It really is," Hollie said, fastening the clip in her hair to see how it looked. She dipped her head to show her sisters, and they both agreed that it looked beautiful. For a long time, their family had not been complete, but now another person was leaving. Hollie knew it was the duty of every girl to be married, and while she was looking forward to the prospect, she could not ignore the pang of sorrow in her soul. It would take a great deal of fortitude to leave her family and her home behind. Looking up at her father, she wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace.

"I have some pleasing news for ye as well," Allan said once they had finished hugging. "Jacques is going tae arrive here tae escort ye tae France. I received a messenger ahead of his arrival. Apparently, he cannae wait tae meet ye."

His words were met with excited whispers from the girls, and Hollie blushed at the thought of meeting Jacques even before the wedding. According to all reports, he was a handsome man with a charming reputation, and she had been eagerly looking forward to meeting him. At least now she would be spared the nerves of meeting her husband for the first time at the wedding. It would be good to spend some time getting to know him on the voyage to France.

"Then I must prepare myself for his arrival and ensure that his hopes are not dashed when he meets me. I want him tae know that his journey has nae been in vain," Hollie said, rising from her chair. She thanked her family again for the gifts and walked back to her room, fiddling with her hair clasp as she did so.

"Ye look pretty as a picture," Lily said. Lily was ten years older than Hollie and had been Hollie's maid for as long as Hollie could remember. Lily had been in the household for a long time, and when she saw the hair clasp that Hollie wore, she clapped her hands together and smiled. "That was yer mother's!" she exclaimed.

Hollie smiled shyly. "Da gave it tae me as a gift. He said that she would have wanted me tae have it. I also got these from Anna and

Charlotte,” she said, showing the book and the perfume.

“Well, ye are a lucky one indeed. I’m sure they will come in handy for yer new life. Are ye excited tae leave?”

“I am,” Hollie sighed, which made it sound as though she wasn’t excited at all.

“Oh, come now, poppet, what’s wrong?”

“I am excited tae gae on the adventure, but I’m gaeing tae miss everyone here terribly. I despise the thought that I’m never going tae see them again.”

“I dinnae know if that’s necessarily true. With the amount of boats that are sailing around the world, it does nae seem tae difficult for ye tae see each other again. The day will come when it’ll be just like hopping on a horse and carriage!” Lily said.

Hollie smiled, although she wasn’t sure if this was actually true or not. Still, it was a nice thought. “I know I’m being silly. But it is a lot tae think about.”

“Oh, aye, it’s nae a wee change for ye. But this is gaeing tae be a grand adventure. I hae heard a lot about France. We could live like kings! And it will dae yer da good as well. Trading with France will open up a great deal of opportunities for him. Ye are daeing him proud, lass, and ye should be honored that ye hae won the attention of such a distinguished figure. It’s nae every lass who gets tae gae tae France. Ye could hae ended up being the wife of a miserable old laird in a miserable old castle somewhere.”

Hollie smirked at this and nodded. It was a grand opportunity that she had been given, and she tried to think of the positives, the things she could look forward to rather than what she was leaving behind. She assumed that some of Lily’s enthusiasm was borne from the fact that she was going to accompany Hollie on this new adventure as well, and for a maid, it must have been even more exciting.

“As for my husband, it turns out that he’s arriving here presently. It will only be a few days until we meet.”

“How exciting!” Lily said.

Hollie smiled. It *was* exciting indeed, and although it would be difficult to wrench herself away from this place that had been her home for all her life, it was going to be for the best. That’s what she kept telling herself, anyway. France beckoned and with it a new life—a life where she could be more than she was, a life where she could be

a woman rather than a girl, a wife rather than a daughter and, in time, perhaps a mother too.

The thought was enough to bring a tear to her eye.

The few days that passed were strange for Hollie. In a way, it was as though everything was usual; people went about their business as though nothing had happened while Anna and Charlotte descended into petty bickering despite their promise to make Hollie's last few days in the household quiet ones. There were moments when Hollie had to remind herself that she really was going to be married away, for it was so easy to slip into the routine of what she had been used to. However, there were also many occasions when people who lived in the manor or in the nearby village came to pay their respects to her, wishing her well as this new stage of her life began. She tried to cherish every moment, to make sure she glanced at every inch of the house to etch it in her mind before she left for good. Although she hoped to return often, she wasn't sure how often that might be. France was a long way away, after all, and she would have new duties and obligations that might prevent her from coming home.

So she walked through the hallways of her home like a ghost, letting memories drift through her mind, each one bittersweet. She smiled as she remembered walking through the gardens with her mother and learning all about flowers and animals. She also remembered walking through the hallways with her father, hand in hand, as he told her that she would be a sister. And then there was the most powerful memory of all, the one that wrenched at her heart; the one where her mother died.

Hollie still remembered the day clearly. It was a joyous occasion as Charlotte had just been born, but in the years following her birth, their mother had lacked the strength to remain in the world. It was as though she had given her all to ensure that Charlotte could enter the world, and after giving herself to three children, Hollie's mother

simply didn't have any more to give. It was a strange ailment, though. The woman had been bedridden and rarely stepped out into the sun. It had taken her a few years to die, but Hollie's mother had been a ghost long before that.

Hollie had walked in to see her mother pale and still. It was a chilling thing for anyone to see, let alone a young girl. Hollie had reached out to touch her mother's hand, expecting it to twitch in response, but instead, there was nothing. It took a great deal of time for her to realize that her mother was never coming back. Even now, there were moments when Hollie thought she heard a particular lilting laugh or saw a flash of golden hair that she thought was the sign of an impossible miracle. But no, there was only sadness now, and she vowed to take this with her because she wasn't going to let herself forget her mother.

The gardens were bright and beautiful, each flower adding to the vivid display of natural beauty. She wondered if the gardens would be this beautiful in France. Lily told her that there would be new kinds of flowers to learn about and that it would be a chance to experience something new. Little by little, the servants were packing her belongings as well. Every time she went into her room, it felt as though a little bit more had been stripped away, and soon she would be stripped away as well, as though she was just another thing in this house that could be replaced. It was strange to think about all the memories that were going to be made here that she simply would not be a part of, and her heart began to sink.

But this was the way the world worked. Women went off to be married to husbands, to experience life in a new way. It was selfish to want to try and remain here. What good would that do for the family? No, she had to quell the sadness and embrace the sense of excitement and adventure that came with this opportunity. Being excited for it didn't mean that she wasn't going to miss this place or her family.

She was sure that she would feel better when Jacques arrived.



THERE WAS a strange kind of energy in the air on the day she was due to meet her new husband. It was as though everything was crackling around her. People seemed to be in more of a rush than usual, and

Hollie became swept up in the excitement.

Horses trotted into the courtyard, and people gathered around with bated breath, eager to see this Frenchman. The door opened to the carriage. Hollie was standing with her sisters, and each one of them held in their breath as Jacques stepped out. Hollie was... impressed, she supposed, with the clothes of the man. He was lean, with long black hair that looked as though it had been oiled. His body was narrow and his face sharp, with eyes like pitted coal. His lips were ghostly, and the feeling she got from him was one of coldness. It was hardly what she expected. She had hoped that she would be swept away by his dashing good looks and feel the fire of love being stoked before her, yet within her, she was empty.

Jacques stepped out of the carriage and peeled away gloves, revealing long, slender fingers. He passed a surveying glance around the courtyard and pressed his lips together, tilting his neck back so that the tip of his nose pointed in the air.

“Isn’t anyone going to come and relieve me of my gloves?” he spoke in a reedy French accent, looking around expectantly, as though some great offense had been committed against him. A servant immediately rushed forward and took the gloves from him. Jacques looked at the servant with disdain.

“It’s a pleasure tae meet ye, Jacques. Ye dae us a great honor with yer presence. Please come and meet my daughters,” Allan said. Jacques’s lips twisted into something that was akin to a smile, but it was a smile that looked practiced. Allan brought him to meet the girls one by one, introducing him to Hollie last. “This is the one ye hae come tae see, the one who will be yer wife,” Allan said.

As soon as Jacques met Hollie, his face lit up. He took her hand, and there was no denying the joyous look upon her face, or the relief. “Oh yes! Oh yes, she will do nicely!” Jacques exclaimed. He leaned down and pressed his lips against the back of Hollie’s palm. Hollie stopped herself from cringing, as his lips were cold.

“It’s a pleasure tae meet ye, Jacques. I hope that ye enjoy my home. I’m sure that I will enjoy seeing yer home when we returned tae France,” Hollie said.

“Indeed,” Jacques said. “Shall we go inside? It has been a long journey, and I could do with some refreshment.”

Hollie was a little perturbed that he hadn’t said anything about

how he was looking forward to having her see his home either, but she told herself that he was probably tired from the journey. They went inside the house, and Allan showed them into a sitting room, where servants brought in tea. It only took one sip for Jacques to express his disdain. He scrunched up his face as though he had just tasted poison. Hollie sipped the tea herself and could not taste anything wrong with it.

“I’m sorry, Jacques, is there anything the matter?” Allan asked.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to do me, but this tea is no good, no good at all.” He glared at the nearest servant. “Have none of you ever prepared tea properly before? Go and fetch me another. This time add a dash of peppermint, if you have such a thing up here.” He turned back to Allan and the girls. “I don’t know how you stand it, living up here, so far from civilization. It’s as though you’re in another world.”

“We managed,” Allan replied. Hollie could tell by his tone that he was holding something back. Hollie could sense that this wasn’t going the way she had hoped, so she set her cup down on the table and tried to make pleasant conversation.

“How was yer journey? Ye said it was tiring?”

Jacques nodded. “It was indeed. I would have thought that I’d be used to it by now, considering I’ve been on boats most of my life, but it is still a draining experience. It’s part of the reason why I wanted to come here directly; I wanted to make sure that you cope with the rigors of travel, as well as wanting to see you, of course. I know that we are going to have the rest of our lives to be together, but I still did not want to waste a single day,” he said, his words growing warmer with charm.

Hollie relaxed a little with relief, glad that he wasn’t entirely lacking in decorum. However, it was at this point when the servant returned with a fresh cup of tea. Jacques wore a stern look on his face as he took it and made the servant remain by his side by holding up a single finger. Jacques sipped the tea and swirled it around in his mouth before swallowing and nodding.

“Passable,” was his withering assessment. The servant looked relieved to have been able to leave Jacques’s presence without suffering another rebuke. “I don’t know how you cope with such a lack of skill. My father and I would never tolerate such a thing. I

suppose you have to make do with what you get out here. It is remarkable how this place has changed, though. I used to hear all kinds of stories when I was younger about the clans of the Highlands, fierce and vicious, dealing with savage Vikings no less.”

“Aye, well, that was a long time ago. We hae changed a great deal since then,” Allan said.

“Oh, I’m sure, I’m sure, and it will be a great boon to my father and I that we have a partnership with you. It will do our business good to gain a foothold in Scotland. I can see that this is a place of great change, on the cusp of something great, and I’m excited that I can play a small part in it.”

“Good,” Allan said, relieved that Jacques seemed to be complimentary now. “And Hollie is excited tae begin her journey as well. It is a shame that we will nae be able tae attend the wedding. I hope that ye will take good care of my daughter.”

“Oh, I will. I will treat her like a rare and beautiful flower,” Jacques said, inclining his head. “And we shall live a life that is fitting for one so beautiful. I will be honored to have her on my arm as we attend various balls and social events. My father is an important person, you know. He gets invited to a lot of places. I daresay the landscape of Europe would look very different if it wasn’t for his trading company. He has links with people in Spain, Portugal, Italy... it’s very impressive,” Jacques boasted.

“And what dae ye dae with yer da?” Hollie asked.

She only meant the question to be an innocuous one, but it ended up making Jacques stammer and flush crimson. He blurted out some answer about managing various things, but Hollie thought it was an odd way to react. Jacques set down the teacup and rose from the table, practically demanding that Allan should show him around the house, suggesting that he and Allan had some details he wished to discuss. Since Hollie wasn’t invited along, it was implied that these were things that only concerned men, which annoyed Hollie as she thought herself as capable as any man. It was a shame that Jacques did not seem to think so, but she hoped she would be able to change her mind.

She and her sisters rose and bowed their heads out of respect as the men left the room. Hollie smiled nervously.

Charlotte was the first one to speak, sighing heavily. “Well, Sister,

I'm afraid tae say that ye dinnae hae much tae be excited about."

"What dae ye mean, Charlotte?" Anna said sharply. "Ye should nae say such things! Jacques seems like an impressive man tae me. Look at the way he was dressed!"

"Aye, but I dinnae like him. I hae a good sense about these things," Charlotte said, willing and able to dismiss a man within a sentence.

"It doesnae matter what we think. What matters is what Hollie thinks," Anna said.

The two sets of eyes slowly turned to settle on Hollie, who wore a weak smile.

"I believe... I believe that he is an ambitious man, and it's certainly impressive tae hear about what he and his da hae built," she admitted.

Charlotte giggled with laughter. "I knew it! I knew that ye would nae be excited. Oh, I hope Da chooses a more fitting man for me when it's my time tae get married."

Anna frowned and scolded Charlotte. Hollie cringed, worried that she was speaking loud enough for other people to hear.

"Ye should nae speak about our distinguished guest like that," Anna said.

"I'm sure that he's just tired from the journey. It's probably my fault anyway. I hae never been taught how tae speak tae men properly. But I will hae plenty of chances tae learn during the voyage tae France. By the time we return, I will be the perfect wife."

"I agree," Anna said, nodding firmly. "I think it's best tae be positive in this situation. Jacques was very complimentary about yer appearance tae. I think there's no doubt he haes fallen in love with ye. I'm sure that yer bond will deepen, and I can think of naething more romantic than sailing tae France taegether. People fall in love like that all the time."

"Maybe in yer books," Charlotte said with a roll of her eyes, "but life is nae a book, Anna. I wish ye the best, Hollie. I hae a feeling ye are gaeing tae need it." She rocked back in her seat and had a wicked smile on her face.

Hollie made a show of thanking her and was glad that Anna agreed with her. However, doubt began to creep into her heart as the initial meeting with Jacques had not been as she had hoped. But then again, life was rarely as one hoped, and it did not mean that things were worthless.

HOWEVER, during the course of Jacques's visit, the doubts that existed in Hollie's heart only grew. She waited and waited to spend more time with Jacques, hoping that by spending some time alone together, she might get used to the way he conducted himself and his sense of humor. Although they were to be married, they were little more than strangers at the moment, so she wanted to hurry to the part where they were able to speak about intimate things. Yet Jacques had other things to do.

After he had been talking with Allan, he came back to Hollie. Her heart leaped with excitement (she forced it to) and smiled.

"Would ye care tae gae for a walk with me around the gardens?" Hollie asked.

"I would love to, my dear, but I'm afraid I have some important meetings to attend while I'm here on my father's behalf. I thought I should make good use of the trip after all because I don't know when I'm going to be here again, and Father would be so angry with me if I let him down."

"I can see ye take yer duty tae yer da seriously. Are ye hoping tae take over his company one day?"

Hollie was surprised when Jacques met the question with a grunted laugh. "A long time ago, I thought that would be the case, but Father is never going to let the company slip through his fingers until he dies, and I am not prepared to wait that long to fulfill my ambitions. No, I am going to train to be a doctor when I return to France, and in the future, we will see what happens with my father's company."

"A doctor? That is very impressive and noble. Ye must hae a kind heart tae want tae help sae many people."

"Yes, yes, I suppose I do," Jacques said, as though the thought had only just occurred to him. "But I'm only going to treat the ones who are most worthy of my attention. I feel as though it's a good way to keep my face known in the important circles and a good way to maintain favors. After all, imagine what kind of things people will owe me if I save their life?"

His eyes flashed with greed, and Hollie found herself disappointed again. Before she could say anything else, he had already taken his

leave of her, kissing her on the hand once more. She brought the hand to her breast and cradled it, wishing the feeling of trepidation would go away. She told herself that he had just been joking. He must have been joking, after all, for who would have gone into the medical profession to elicit favors from the social elite? It was clearly a joke that she didn't understand, and she would have to make more of an effort to understand Jacques. He was from a different culture, and they clearly had different ideas on how to conduct themselves. Navigating this would be an adventure in and of itself, and it was something that Hollie had to prepare herself for.

Even so, she was disheartened to learn that she had not been the only reason for Jacques's early visit. She had hoped to use the time to show him around her home so that he might understand her a little better too, but then again, she supposed that she would have enough time on the ship to get to know him. Hollie sighed; it was tiring to be so positive.

The day came when Hollie was due to leave. She had barely seen anything of Jacques over the past few days, but she was not prepared to make a commotion because of it. However, as her belongings were being loaded onto a wagon beside Jacques's carriage, Jacques spoke out in consternation.

"What is the meaning of this? Are these gifts for me?" he asked.

Hollie, and her father, were confused. "Nay, Jacques, these are Hollie's belongings. She is returning with ye tae France, aye?" Allan asked.

Jacques tilted his head to the side and furrowed his brow. "I hadn't planned for it to be so, but I suppose it does make some sense. Is that what you desire?" Jacques asked, turning to Hollie.

She nodded, wondering what had happened for this miscommunication to occur. "Of course I dae. I hope that we can get tae know each other better while we are sailing. And it means we dinnae hae tae wait sae long," she said, punctuating her words with a sweet smile.

"I apologize if I misconstrued," Allan said. "When ye arranged tae come here, I thought ye were coming tae take Hollie back with ye."

Jacques dismissed the thought with a wave of a hand. "I suppose these things have a way of working themselves out. As long as everyone is in agreement, I have no qualms with it. But please, I must insist that you grant me some time alone to study while we are sailing. There is much that I must learn about becoming a doctor, and I find that time has a funny habit of slipping away."

"Of course," Hollie said. "I will nae dae anything tae disturb ye, but I will be ready tae keep ye company whenever ye need it."

She hoped that her willingness to spend time with him would

mollify Jacques and make him see that she could be a good wife. It was strange to think the thought of her coming back with him hadn't occurred to Jacques, though, and for a moment, she wondered how much of a priority this marriage truly was to him. Not that it mattered now; the agreement had been struck, and the marriage was happening. She simply had to make the best out of the situation. At least she wouldn't be alone, for Lily would accompany her.

Jacques waited beside the carriage, looking up at the sky while Hollie said her goodbyes to her family. She wore her pretty hair clip and embraced her sisters tightly. Then she wrapped her arms around her father and clamped her eyes shut in a futile effort to prevent tears from trickling down her cheeks. She felt his body shudder too. It was an emotional time for the family, but she also knew that if she didn't wrench herself away, she would stay here, locked with them, unable to free herself.

With a sad, trembling voice, she parted from them and walked to the carriage. Jacques held her hand, helping her up into the carriage. He did not do the same for Lily. As the carriage pulled away, Hollie looked out of the window at her family standing there, looking smaller and smaller as the wagon pulled away. The house loomed large behind them, a house that was filled with her memories and her history, but it too began to recede into the distance. She was entering a new stage of her life, and she had no idea where it was going to take her. She had hoped that the sadness would be secondary to the burst of love she would be feeling for her new husband, but that had not taken hold yet.

She told herself it was a matter of time, only a matter of time, and for now, it was time to indulge her sorrow.



THE CARRIAGE TRUNDLED along the Highland roads, approaching the coast and the docks. The water shimmered, stretching out as far as the eye could see. In the far distance, it met the sky, and it was impossible for Hollie to tell where one ended and the other began. The sunlight glistened upon the waves, making it appear as though the water was dancing. The docks were filled with all manner of boats.

As they drew closer, the smell of brine filled the air. Dockhands

shouted at each other in their harsh, crass way. This was a world away from the refined life that Hollie had been privy to. The men here were rough and muscular, tattooed and scarred by the rigors of life. Great hauls of fish were paraded around, barrels were rolled, and it was as though it was its own world with its own rules. The boats lolled in the harbor, and in the distance, she could see the outline of other ships. It was amazing to think about the places that these ships went to, how the world was open to them in a way that it had never been to Hollie. To think of all the places in the world was remarkable, and all the people too! It was enough to make her stand in awe at the enormity of the world as it spun around her and the knowledge that she was only one small part of it.

"The ship is this way," Jacques said, pointing to an elegant ship made of dark wood. Jacques whistled towards some men near the boat to come and fetch his belongings and the belongings of Hollie and Lily as well. Jacques walked confidently toward the boat, but Hollie and Lily were cautious as the jetty was wet, and they were afraid of slipping.

"That's a fine boat there. Dae ye own it?" Hollie asked.

"Not this one, although she is a fine vessel. The captain, though, well, he is not so fine. I would be careful around him if I were you. Sometimes you have to make do with what you can get," Jacques said as he boarded the ship. Hollie and Lily followed him up the plank. Hollie looked down at the dark water around the ship. It was foreboding and chilling, and she thought it must have been the easiest thing in the world to slip under the surface and disappear entirely. Hollie wondered if that happened often, and she respected the sailor's bravery to put themselves in so much danger.

The boat was long, with a raised section at either end of the deck. One huge, giant mast rose from the middle of the boat, and this was flanked by two smaller masts. The sails were currently down, giving the ship a bare, naked look. Men hustled and bustled all across the deck, though, and none of them seemed to pay much attention to the newcomers. Jacques turned toward the aft of the ship, and Hollie followed his gaze. There she saw a tall man standing with their back turned toward them, his gaze locked on the horizon. Even in that moment, there was something about him that swept her away, something romantic, as though he was a man standing on the edge of

the world.

Jacques huffed as he approached the man. "Captain Baxter, I have returned!" Jacques called out.

Hollie was only a few paces behind. The captain turned around slowly, and when Hollie had a full view of his face, she gasped, and not because he was so handsome, he took her breath away. It was because there was a long, angled scar that ran from the eyebrow of his right eye to the cheek below. His eye still seemed to work perfectly fine, but the scar defined his face and marred the otherwise symmetrical handsomeness of his appearance. His eyes were as blue as the sea around them, and the scar only helped draw attention to him. He had long light brown hair that fell to his shoulders, and his dark-blue cloth billowed around him. There was something about the man that made Hollie's chest tighten, although she wasn't entirely sure what it was. There was a sense of power about him, a sense of destiny, as though the world was his to do with as he pleased.

"Welcome back," Captain Baxter said dryly, and Hollie noticed that he spoke with a Scottish accent. She wasn't sure why this took her by surprise, but it did.

"I've brought two passengers for the return journey," Jacques said. "This is my betrothed, Hollie Montgomery, and her maid, Lily."

Hollie smiled and curtsied, but the captain regarded her coolly. His gaze lingered on Lily for a few moments, though, and his brow furrowed slightly. Whatever thought had been on his mind was quickly dismissed, however.

"Ye never told me there would be passengers," the captain said.

Jacques huffed and pinched his nose. "I'm telling you now."

"Ye cannae just declare that ye are bringing on two more passengers. Where are they gaeing tae sleep? I hae nae made preparations for them," Captain Baxter said curtly.

"It doesn't matter. As far as I'm concerned, they can have your quarters. You're always quick to boast about the industrious spirit of your men, so I have no doubt that they can find a way to accommodate my guests. Either way, you are being handsomely paid by my father, and I expect you to abide by my wishes until we are back in France."

Captain Baxter clenched his jaw. For a moment, Hollie thought that he was going to strike Jacques. He had that way about him, as

though anything was possible.

“We will nae be any trouble. I promise. We just want tae get tae France. It’s good tae know that a Scot is the captain, though. Where dae ye hail from? I cannae say I’m familiar with the Baxter name.”

The captain regarded her with a stony glance. She gasped a little, surprised by the intensity with which he looked at her. Something swirled within his eyes, something that, for a moment, she thought she recognized, but then it was gone.

“I’m nae a Scot. I was only born there. My life is out on the seas. I suggest that ye keep yerself out of trouble. This is nae a place for lasses who dinnae know how tae conduct themselves. The sea is a dangerous place. All it takes is one slip, and ye are gone.” He snapped his fingers as he said this. “If ye know what’s good for ye, ye will stay in yer cabin.”

“How dare you speak to her like that! This woman is going to be my *wife*! You will treat her with the same respect as you treat me, *Jamie*.”

The use of the captain’s first name seemed to make him flinch, but he did not back down from his forthright position. “It’s my ship, and I’ll talk tae people how I want tae talk tae them,” Jamie said, stepping forward so that there was nothing but inches between him and Jacques. “Ye may hae paid for the trip, but it will take ye a good long while tae get back tae France if I leave ye here. While we’re on the ship, it’s *Captain* Baxter. My word is law, and that gaes for all of ye.” The captain pointed a finger at Hollie and Lily, then he strode away from them, muttering to himself.

Jacques looked flustered. “As I said, he’s a rather uncouth man, and I would suggest you spend as little time with him as possible. These men at sea...they think they are a law unto themselves. They’ve forgotten how to exist in a civilized world. I can only apologize for his behavior,” he said.

Hollie didn’t need an apology, though. It was quite clear that the captain didn’t want her on his ship, but that only made her determined to prove to him that she did have a place here. It seemed as though she had a lot to prove to both Jacques and Captain Baxter, and she vowed to do so before the voyage was over.

Despite Captain Baxter's protestations, he was able to find a cabin for Hollie and Lily. It wasn't grand at all, but it would do for the time being, and Hollie wasn't one to complain. It was especially nothing compared to the cabin given to Jacques, which was like a large study, with a desk in it as well. He apologized for being unable to give this to her, as he said that he needed it to embark on his doctoral studies.

"I'm nae sure I like it here. The men all seem kind of rough," Lily said before they had even left port. This time it was Hollie's turn to allay Lily's fears. She told Lily not to worry and was certain that everything would work out for the best. Before she could say anything else, there were great cries from the deck, an indication that the boat was going to embark from the dock. Despite Captain Baxter's warning to stay out of sight, Hollie wasn't going to miss such a thing.

She and Lily ran up to the deck and stood at the side of the ship, looking out at the docks. There was a cry from one of the sailors, Captain Baxter's second-in-command, a flame-haired, tall man who looked like a brute. At his barked order, the sails were unfurled. They expanded like wings, drawing taut to capture the wind that would propel them along the open sea. For now, though, the boat was being driven by oars. Hollie peered over the side and saw them poking out of the ship like spiders' legs. They moved in unison, slicing through the waves, moving the boat slowly out of port.

It was a strange sensation, to begin with as, for a moment, it felt as though the world was moving around the ship, rather than the ship moving. Water lapped against the boat, and then, as it increased speed, Hollie started to feel the sense of motion within her. She swayed, and her stomach lurched. It was the most incredible feeling,

and she stood there, watching the Highlands recede into the distance. The rolling hills faded into a mist as the boat sailed away, and soon enough, the wind caught them and dragged them into the wide waters. They were alone. It was an odd sense of isolation out there on the water. There was no way for Hollie to speak to anyone back at home, and if anything should happen, then they would simply be lost at sea. Fear curdled in her heart. Captain Baxter's threat echoed within her mind. She thought of his scar and wondered what danger of the sea had given him such a lingering wound.

But no adventure came without some kind of risk or danger, and she was determined to enjoy it because she knew that's what her mother would have wanted for her.



THEIR INITIAL LEG was to sail down the coast of England on their way to France, and they were due to stop off at a port in the South before making the next leg of their journey across the channel. This would give the ship a chance to restock their supplies and exchange some cargo.

The water was calm, and occasionally in the distance, Hollie could make out the English coastline through the mist of the horizon. However, it wasn't as adventure-filled as she had believed it would be. The truth was that life at sea was rather mundane. The crew had their duties, and they performed them with aplomb while Jacques stayed true to his word and mostly remained in his cabin. Hollie did not wish to disturb him as she knew that his studies were very important to him, but she found herself idling away the hours in boredom. At first, she was content to stare out at sea, but the landscape did not change, and she soon grew tired of it.

To pass the time, she pulled out the book that Anna had given her as a gift. Hollie didn't agree with the advice at all. Most of it suggested that to win a man's heart, she should simply subsume herself into the man and forego any ambition or hope to live a life of individuality. It seemed terribly unfair to her that a man should get to be a husband yet still retain his ambition, while a woman had to surrender everything. Still, she appreciated the sentiment of the gift and locked the lessons into the back of her mind, just in case they should become

useful one day.

The perfume she kept in its vial, though, intending to use it on her wedding day. She was tempted to spray some on her neck to see if it would elicit any reaction from Jacques, but there was no use on the ship. She would have to be patient, and she was sure that when the time came, the perfume would not let her down. She couldn't imagine Charlotte giving her anything that was useless.

During the voyage, though, she tried to get the captain's attention, but whenever she tried to speak to Captain Baxter, she was always told that he was elsewhere. It was clear that he did not want her on the ship, but it was the height of rudeness to ignore her completely. The longer this went on, the more indignant she became, and the more she longed to speak with the captain. These men were both infuriating, she thought, and she realized how blessed she had been to have sisters rather than brothers. Anna and Charlotte might have bickered a lot, but at least Hollie knew how to cope with them. Jacques and Captain Baxter were impossible, and they weren't making this voyage fun for Hollie at all.

She hoped that this was not a sign for the rest of her life.



IT WAS NIGHT. Jamie stood at the prow of his ship, looking out toward the horizon. The moon hung in the sky like a silver coin. The sea was as dark as wine, only occasionally illuminated by a reflection of the moonlight. The stars twinkled above him as though they had been stitched on an obsidian blanket. In moments like this, he felt blessed to be a witness to this beauty, although he was acutely aware of how lonely he felt as well.

He sighed heavily as he thought about what had gone before, about how every day of his life had been leading up to this voyage, and how there were still unforeseen complications. This girl and her maid who had arrived irked him because it was something he hadn't planned for. It was typical of Jacques, though. He told himself that he was going to be doing her a favor. He couldn't think of anything worse than being married to a man like Jacques, especially for a lass as pretty and sweet as Hollie. She was as beautiful as the moon, and he hated his heart for being so weak as to recognize her beauty. It

wouldn't do him any good. His heart was a wretched thing, and it didn't deserve love.

He didn't deserve love.

There was only one thing in this world he wanted, and that was revenge. It didn't make sense to pine for anything else or even wonder what his life might be like if he made different choices.

There *were* no other choices. The path of his life had been set a long time ago when he was a child and had cradled the bodies of his dead parents. He closed his eyes. A single tear crawled out and ran down his scar. He exhaled slowly. Soon enough, the pain would be gone. Soon enough, he would strike back at the vile man who had ordered the death of his parents, and then he would finally be able to let go of the bitterness that festered in his heart.

It was just a shame that the girl had to be involved. He didn't want anyone innocent to get hurt, but sometimes there was no helping it.

He had warned her that the sea was a dangerous place, but she hadn't heeded his warning. According to Hamish, his second-in-command, the girl had been asking to speak with him. Jamie didn't know why, nor did he care. It would just prove to be a distraction, and he had to remain focused. Nothing could stop him from letting this plan unfold now.



THEY DOCKED in the port of Southampton, a small town on the south coast of England that was the last stop before France. Before he disembarked for shore, he looked across to the other side of the ship where the girl was standing. For a moment, their eyes locked. She raised a hand, waving to get his attention. He turned away without acknowledging her. There were other matters to attend to. Jacques emerged from his cabin as well and made his way to some meeting or another where Jamie was sure he would conduct business for his father.

Jamie wandered the docks of Southampton for a couple of hours, taking in wares to see if there was any way he could make some quick coin. He met old friends and forced a smile, keeping his true emotions hidden within. Then he returned to the inn where Jacques was. Jamie walked in and slammed a coin down on the bar, ordering a beer,

before approaching his benefactor. He swung his leg over a stool and joined Jacques at a table. Other men surrounded him and were playing cards, and they were all in good spirits as Jacques was an enthusiastic card player yet lacked skill. Jamie took a cursory look at the coin that had been shared around. Jacques's pile was noticeably smaller than those of the other players, who grumbled when Jamie told them to leave. They would have to find another fool who was so easily parted from his coin.

"What are you doing? I was having fun! It can't be time to leave the ship already, can it?" Jacques said, his words slurring a little as he had clearly enjoyed himself too much.

"Nae yet, but there's something I need tae talk with ye about. There's an issue with the ship. It's nae gaeing tae make it tae France. We need another one."

Jacques furrowed his brow and shook his head. "What do you mean we need another ship? We already have a ship."

"That's what I'm trying tae tell ye. There's a problem with the oars. If we continue now, the whole thing could sink, and I doubt ye want that tae happen, especially nae with yer wife on board. I've been asking around, and the only ship that's available is bigger, which means we're gaeing tae need more men. Now I know some men who can help, but obviously, it's gaeing tae increase the price."

"That's not...that's not fair," Jacques said, his words interrupted by a belch. "Father has set aside money for this endeavor. I can't go back to him and tell him that the price has increased."

"I dinnae know, I'm sure ye can. After all, ye are bringing yer bride back! It is gaeing tae be a happy occasion, and I'm sure that any profits ye make from yer new trade deal with the Highlanders is gaeing tae be enough tae cover the costs. Yer word gaes a long way around here, as does the word of yer da. I'm sure there are plenty of men who would be eager tae be on the same boat as ye. Besides, this kind of thing always happens. Ye hae tae be willing tae think of yer feet. That's how yer da made his fortune, isnae it?"

Jacques nodded slowly, the words gradually making some sort of sense to him. "But what about these men? Can they...can they be trusted?"

"Oh, aye! I vouch for them myself. I stake my own reputation on it," Jamie said, slapping Jacques on the back. Jacques was clearly not

convinced, but Jamie was insistent, and he usually had a way of getting what he wanted. He was the captain, after all, and if he said there was a problem with the ship, then that was that. He didn't have any qualms about lying to Jacques either, and the fact that it would hit his father where it hurt most—in the coin purse—was even better.

It would have been easier without having to deal with the girl, but Jamie would find a way to see that she was out of harm's way. He stared at Jacques, the dumb fool not knowing what fate awaited him. The end was so close that Jamie could almost taste it.

Hollie's face was one of concern when she noticed that her belongings were being taken off of the ship. Captain Baxter was still nowhere to be found, and she was annoyed that nobody was taking any notice of her. It was Lily who eventually went up to the second-in-command and tapped him on the shoulder. Angus turned around slowly and looked down at Lily, who had both hands on her hips, and looked up at him indignantly.

"What dae ye want?" he asked in a slow drawl.

"I want ye tae tell us what's gaeing on. Why are ye taking our belongings away?" Lily asked. Hollie came to stand beside her and aided her friend with a sharp nod.

Angus smiled, revealing a row of white teeth behind his thick red beard. He was broad of shoulder and stood like a giant, and he didn't take his eyes off Lily for one moment.

"There's been a change of plan. There's a problem with the ship, ye see. We hae tae move tae a different one."

"A different ship?" Lily gasped.

"Aye, such is the way of the wind. Ye can never tell which way it's gaeing tae blow," he said with a dry laugh before he moved away. Lily was indignant at the way he had spoken to her, but Hollie thought it was quite poetic. Her life had been one of rhythm and routine. At home, everything had always been planned out to the minute, whereas out here, the world was wild and chaotic.

"A new ship..." Hollie breathed.

"This is nae good, nae good at all," Lily said.

"What dae ye mean?"

"A new ship means a new crew, Hollie. It's already bad enough that we're surrounded by these men, and now there are gaeing tae be

more. I dinnae like this captain, and frankly, I dinnae like the way Jacques is treating ye. He should be keeping a better watch on ye in case any of these men should get ideas. Ye know what men are like when they've been at sea for a while," she said, although Hollie had no idea what she was talking about. "I dinnae think yer da would want ye tae be on a ship with a new crew. Perhaps we should think about returning home for a wee while."

"I hae nae come this far just tae return home," Hollie said, aghast that Lily would even suggest such a thing. "We should at least see the new boat."

She turned without warning before Lily could call her back and followed the other sailors down to another boat that awaited them on the docks. This one was even bigger. It looked like a behemoth, and she had to tilt her neck all the way back to gaze up at the crow's nest atop the mast. Her lips parted in awe as she made her way onto the boat, where she found Jacques pacing about the deck. Captain Baxter was leaning against the mast.

"I don't like this. I don't like this at all," Jacques said as he glanced at the parade of men who were coming onto the boat.

"I told ye that we would be haeing new men," he said.

"Yes, you told me when I was drunk," Jacques said darkly. Then he became aware of Hollie's presence and greeted her with a puzzled look. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I came tae see the new ship. All of my belongings are being brought here. I dinnae want tae be left behind," she said, implying her annoyance at being left out of proceedings.

"We also came tae suggest the possibility of returning tae the Highlands. We were never told of this change," Lily said. Hollie glared at her, and Lily purposefully ignored it.

"It was nae a planned change. Unfortunately, there was a problem with the oars. If ye would like tae return tae the Highlands, I'm sure there's a ship that could take ye back there," Captain Baxter said with a callous tone. It was as though he didn't care whether she stayed or not, and a part of Hollie wondered whether this was just a ploy to get her off his ship. From the first moment they had met, he had taken a dislike to her, and she didn't understand why. It wasn't fair for her to be treated like this, and she didn't want to be summarily dismissed without any sense of courtesy or respect. But before she could say

something herself, Jacques spoke up.

“Perhaps the good captain is right. I would hate for this journey to be filled with disaster, and my father will not be happy when I return. I fear even your presence would not be enough to mollify him.” Jacques rubbed his temples as he said this. “It might be best if you return home and I send for you shortly, a few months or so. It should not be too long. I am going to have to explain to my father why this voyage cost more than anticipated.” His eyes suddenly flickered with inspiration. “And perhaps while you await my invitation, you could speak to certain people for me...acting on my behalf to allow my father and I some inroads into the Highlands. I have already made the first efforts, but I’m sure it would hasten things if you could visit with people on my behalf.”

“Then it’s settled. I will see tae it that passage is arranged on another ship,” Captain Baxter said before he strode away. Hollie didn’t have a chance to speak up for herself or argue against them. Jacques was walking in another direction as well, as though he just expected her to do as he asked. Hollie felt numb as she walked back down the plank and returned to the other ship to gather her most prized belongings, which Lily held in a leather satchel. They were sitting on the docks. Hollie had a glum face as she stared at the ships.

“I cannae believe they would dae that,” she said, still puzzled why the captain despised her to such an extent that he was looking for any way to get her off the ship.

“Perhaps it’s for the best, lass. Like Jacques said, it’s only gaeing tae be a few months. It’ll dae ye good tae spend some more time at home anyway, and if ye can dae as he asked, ye might prove yerself tae be a perfect wife for him,” Lily said.

Hollie scowled at the thought of running errands for Jacques. She was supposed to be his wife, not his errand girl. This was supposed to be the start of some brand new adventure. She could just imagine the guffaws from Anna and Charlotte if she returned home so soon after leaving. No. This couldn’t be where her adventure ended. This couldn’t be where she turned tail and retreated home just because men decided it for her. But there was something else as well—the fact that she knew she would likely never see Captain Jamie Baxter again after this. Before that happened, she wanted to know why he disliked her so much.

“I dinnae want tae leave,” Hollie said in a quiet voice. Lily turned toward her and looked at her in shock, almost unable to believe that she had heard Hollie accurately.

“What dae ye mean?”

“I mean that I want tae stay.” Hollie paused to think about her next words carefully. Captain Baxter was like a wild animal, radiating the kind of aura that transfixed her. He was shrouded in mystery, and there was so much about him that she wanted to learn about, but of course, she couldn’t use this as a reason to justify her desires to Lily as Lily would have scolded her for being so intrigued by a man who was clearly a scoundrel. But Hollie didn’t want to be parted from her betrothed either. Jacques may not have been everything she hoped he would be, but if they parted now, then he might lose interest. It was this line of argument she used to try and convince Lily.

“I hae nae been able tae spend any time with Jacques on this voyage, and now he is expecting me tae spend *months* away from him! A lot can happen in months, Lily. I am sae close tae marriage I dinnae want tae see it slip through my fingers. Ye can understand that, surely ye can. Jacques is a particular man, and I want tae show him that I can be the perfect wife, but I cannae dae that if we are worlds apart.”

Lily seemed to consider the matter for a moment. Hollie remained quiet, hoping that the less she spoke, the more convincing she would seem. Their gazes drifted toward the ship, where Captain Baxter’s men were loading up new cargo. One of the men doing this was Angus, and it was evidently hard work because he had stripped his shirt away, revealing a broad torso that was covered in hair. The muscles were sculpted and swollen, while a dark pattern of tattoos had been etched upon his skin. He was so soaked in sweat that he almost looked as though he was a creature that had emerged from the sea.

“I suppose since we are here, there’s no harm in staying for a wee while longer,” Lily said quietly, her voice almost having a purring quality. “Especially if ye think yer marriage is at stake.”

Hollie wasn’t entirely sure what had happened to change Lily’s mind, but she was glad of it. They discussed for some time the best way they knew to board the ship without either Captain Baxter or Jacques knowing, because if either of them heard wind of their plan, then Hollie and Lily would be summarily dismissed again, and no doubt they would have been marched to another ship without any

chance to sneak aboard.

They waited as more and more men boarded the ship, and then heavy cargo was being hauled up. Lily and Hollie noticed that there were great crates of grain waiting to be lifted onto the boat. These crates had material stretched over them, covering the openings. Hollie jerked her head, and Lily followed, albeit reluctantly. They struggled up and wormed their way in, pulling the material over the top of a crate to shield themselves, and then they kept quiet as rope was lashed around the crate, and they were lifted up. Hollie's stomach lurched, and she hoped with all her might that there would not be an accident now. The last thing she wanted was to die by falling through the air with the crate smashing against the docks.

The crate swung and twisted around as it was hoisted up, higher and higher, until it reached the deck of the boat. Then it was pulled down and pushed into the cargo hold. Lily and Hollie held hands, keeping their lips pressed together to ensure that nobody heard them. Since the crate was only filled with grain, none of the crew bothered to handle it with care, so by the end of their journey, Hollie and Lily had some bumps and bruises, but those were a small price to pay for being able to remain on the ship. The adventure could continue now, and then she could go on to France, where her new life could begin. It didn't make sense for her to retreat back to the Highlands when she had already come this far. Jacques and Jamie might have thought they knew what was best for her, but she was not going to let anyone make decisions for her.

Hollie and Lily waited until night fell before they decided to

clamber out of the crates. They landed with a thud. Hollie lost her sense of balance and collapsed in a heap on the floor of the cargo hold, while Lily descended close to her. Hollie struggled up and shot a glance around to see if anyone had heard them, but there wasn't anyone in the cargo hold, so nobody discovered her.

"Where dae we gae now?" Lily asked.

"We need tae find a place tae hid, and ideally some food," Hollie said, clutching her stomach as it rumbled.

They crept through the cargo hold and found the door. They climbed up some stairs and made their way to the deck, which was bathed in moonlight. For a moment, Hollie stood still, basking in the expanse of the wide deck, which was bigger than the previous ship. The sky was above them, stretching out endlessly, with the moon bright and the stars glorious. A smile played upon her lips as she knew that she was free, but then a stern voice broke through her celebratory moment.

"What are ye daeing here?" Captain Baxter asked. He cut a solitary figure in the night, brooding and dark, with half his face illuminated by the silver light of the moon. Hollie gasped, and then she stiffened as tension rippled across her body. She had hoped she could have gone a little longer without being discovered.

"I came back," Hollie said.

"Ye stowed away on my ship," Captain Baxter said, shaking his head.

"I chose tae stay. It's nae as though ye or Jacques asked me what I wanted tae dae. Ye left before the conversation was over," she said haughtily.

“Ye dinnae know what ye are daeing.”

“Oh, dinnae tell me that the sea is dangerous. This is just the way the wind is blowing now. Ye should be used tae things changing.”

Captain Baxter’s expression changed. He tilted his head and furrowed his brow. “What did ye say?”

“I said the wind is changing.”

“Aye...perhaps it is,” he said softly.

“I’m more capable than ye think. I know ye think me as some spoiled lass who doesnae know how tae take care of herself, but I can survive out here. I could even be a part of yer crew if ye let me prove it tae ye.”

Captain Baxter laughed at this while Lilly looked horrified. “Ye can think that if ye like, but any member of my crew would know nae tae sneak aboard a ship. Ye are lucky I was hesitant with my sword. I might hae thought ye some enemy and cut ye down.” It was hard to glean the intent behind his voice. Hollie had no idea if he was jesting or not. “I cannae turn around back tae port now. I suppose since ye are here, ye will hae tae stay. But keep out of trouble. I dinnae want tae hear a peep out of ye.”

The captain walked away and returned to the prow of the ship, where he resumed his vigil. Hollie wasn’t sure what he was watching for, and she did not have the courage to ask. But she had made it back onto the ship, and that was enough for the meantime.

She and Lily made their way downstairs and found the mess hall, where Lily was able to rustle up some rudimentary food. It wasn’t anything like what Hollie would have had at home, but somehow this tasted better. Perhaps it was because it was imbued with the taste of liberty and adventure. After eating, they found a quiet, empty cabin and some blankets, which they pulled over themselves as they slept. Hollie was quite satisfied when she went to sleep because it felt as though she had taken her life into her own hands.



WHEN THEY AWOKE the following morning, Hollie was determined not to fade into the background as Captain Baxter wished. She hated the way he had laughed at her, and she wanted to prove that she was just as capable as any man in his crew.

She announced her presence loudly, although most of the crew were nonplussed, considering they had just arrived and didn't seem interested in anything other than their duties. Jacques didn't emerge from his cabin even when he learned that Hollie had returned to the ship, for he was too focused on his studies. Hollie tried to tell herself that she understood. After all, it was noble that he had such ambitions and such devotion to what he wanted to be.

Despite his initial admission that his intentions were not entirely honorable, Hollie was still proud of him because he would still be able to help people as a doctor, and she was sure that he would develop empathy, if he did not possess it already. It took a great deal of courage to break away from the family legacy, and it would certainly provide a stable life for them. She couldn't escape the fact that he was diametrically opposed to the way Captain Baxter lived his life. There was a man who loved the freedom of the sea, who obeyed his own rules without apology or regard for anything else. His was an adventurous soul, one that was not shackled to the expectations of society. He was a wild one indeed, and Hollie couldn't help but wonder what feelings lurked in his heart, she couldn't help but be intrigued by him, and she found herself wanting to learn as much as she could in the short time she had. Once they reached France, their paths would no longer cross. She would embark on her life with Jacques, and Captain Baxter would return to the sea, obeying the alluring call of his watery mistress.

However, Captain Baxter wasn't at all interested in speaking to her. He had the uncanny knack of disappearing whenever it was most inconvenient to her. There was a moment when she forced herself to stay awake until the small hours of the morning because she knew he liked to stand vigil over the ship during the night. But when she went to approach him, she stopped herself. There was something sad about him, something lonely, and she did not want to interrupt his reverie. She slunk back to her cabin and decided that she would seek to gain his attention in a more traditional way.

One day, instead of wearing her usual dresses, she wore Lily's clothes, which were rougher and more suited to hard work. She grabbed a bucket and began to scrub the deck. It was an unbecoming duty for someone like her to do such a thing, and yet she wanted to show that she could subvert expectations. At first, the sailors looked at

her as though she was mad, but they were eager for the help. As well as scrubbing decks, she helped to keep an inventory of the supplies, ration out food, and do other menial duties that were the realm of servants in her home. Lily helped her to prevent her from making mistakes, and she soon got used to the rhythm and routine of it all.

While the sailors were celebrating her efforts to help, Captain Baxter stood at the wheel of the ship and watched her from afar. His gaze was inscrutable, and he never made any effort to show her that he was impressed or otherwise. He just stared and stared, and she still had no idea about what was going on in his heart.

She wondered if it was a test, if he was seeing how long she would continue to do this for. The soft skin on her fingers was calloused, and muscles ached deep within her. At night when she rested, they screamed, and she found it difficult to sleep. Blisters appeared on her feet, and it would have been the easiest thing to stop doing what she was doing, but she would not allow herself to do so. Day after day, she gave herself to the ship, and when she ate, she felt as though the meal had been truly earned. The taste was always sweet, and the pangs of hunger were quelled for some time afterward. Other sailors raised their mugs of ale toward her, recognizing her efforts. While she was glad to receive the praise of the sailors, she did not receive any attention from the man that she wanted to receive it from, and she still had no idea why he had taken an instant dislike to her.

She was beginning to wonder if she would ever get an answer to the mystery.



IT WAS a fine morning when she was working on the ship. This time she had graduated from doing menial jobs to adjusting the sail. This involved taking thick twine and pulling it tight, or loosening it, adjusting the angle of the sail, which would then, in turn, adjust the direction of the boat. Up until this point, Hollie had not given much thought to how a boat actually sailed, and she was intrigued to discover the intricacies of sailing. The sailors were happy to teach her, and she strained with all her strength to pull the rope taut. Sweat beaded on her brow, and she grit her teeth when suddenly there was a commotion as Jacques finally emerged from his cabin.

“What is the meaning of this?! Hollie, what are you doing?” he exclaimed as he strode forward and pushed his way through the sailors to look at his betrothed working on the boat.

“I’m working on the sails,” Hollie grunted, the words bursting through gritted teeth.

Jacques shook his head, and what little color was left on his face drained away. “I can’t have this! It’s bad enough that you should be here at all, let alone working on the sails like a common sailor. You’re going to be my *wife*. What has gotten into you?”

“I just wanted tae help,” Hollie said.

That wasn’t good enough for Jacques, though. He went apoplectic with rage and scowled. “No wife of mine is going to be a common sailor. I didn’t bring you on this voyage to embarrass me!”

As he cried this, he reached out and grabbed her shoulder, twisting her around. Hollie could feel the rope slipping through her hands. She held on as tightly as she could, but the rope burned, and it felt as though it had some strength of its own. She cried out as she let go, and it whipped around along with a piece of wood that had been used to fasten the rope when the knots had been tied. The world spun, and Hollie lost her balance as the deck became the sky and the sky became the deck, and then there was a lashing pain that cut through her. The next thing she knew, she heard a raw, throaty scream, only to discover moments later that it was emerging from her own mouth.

When Jacques had pulled Hollie away, she had lost grip of the rope. When it whipped around, Hollie was caught, and it left a huge gash on her arm. The pain blazed and throbbed, and Hollie collapsed to the deck with a thud. All the air drained out of her, and she doubled over, clutching her arm. She felt something warm and sticky seeping through her fingers. When she looked down, she saw a dark pool of blood spread out of her, and it took a moment for her to actually acknowledge that it was coming out of her body. The scream of pain echoed in her mind, but once the shock of it was over, she lay there. Jacques towered over her, and she became aware of Lily shouting at him to do something.

“Ye are a doctor!” she cried.

“I...I...I’m yet to complete my studies,” he gawked open-mouthed, like a fish gasping for air.

As Hollie lay there, she gazed up at Jacques, looking to him for salvation. This was the man who was going to be her husband. She was supposed to trust him with her heart, with her *life*, yet while she was in danger, he just stood there, utterly helpless. She groaned in pain again and took her palm away from the wound, which made a jet of blood gush out as she was no longer putting pressure on it. Weakness crept through her, and this was when she thought Jacques would cradle her and tell her everything was going to be well, but instead, she watched his eyes close as he collapsed to the floor, fainting at the sight of all the blood.

Hollie’s mind was going hazy, and everything was a blur. She was vaguely aware of someone else coming up to her and standing over her. She felt strong arms gripping her, and for a moment, she thought that Jacques had actually pulled himself together. Then a moment of

clarity crept into her vision, and she saw the piercing blue eyes of Captain Baxter.

“Ye are gaeing tae be fine lass, just fine. I’ll see tae it that ye are well,” he said, and barked at someone else to get some fabric and some alcohol. “This is gaeing tae sting, sae take a hold of my hand and squeeze when I clean yer wound,” he said.

Hollie felt a large hand slipping around hers. She felt so tiny, as though she could just disappear in his palm. For a moment, she was drifting away in the dreamy feeling of holding hands with him before he held a bottle over her and began to pour it into the wound. Then a terrible stinging sensation thrummed through her, and she doubled over in pain. Her eyes shot open, and her throat was raw from the cry that bellowed out. She clutched Captain Baxter’s hands hard, squeezing them with all her might. He took the bottle away and then pulled out a needle and thread. Hollie could feel the blood pulsing out of her with every beat of her heart, but Captain Baxter didn’t seem to be perturbed at all. She lay there limply as he stitched together her flesh. The pain of the needle passing through her skin was nothing compared to when it had been torn apart, and she wondered if the pain was something she was going to have to live with for the rest of her life.

Lily returned with some water and held it to her lips. Hollie gulped it down while Captain Baxter tore some fabric away from his shirt and wrapped it around her arm.

“Keep it nice and covered, lass, and ye will be fine. Make sure ye dinnae tear apart any of the stitches, otherwise we’ll hae tae dae all this again, but ye should be fine now.”

Hollie gasped in deep breaths and took some more water from Lily. Pain continued to throb in her arm, but it was nowhere near as sharp as it had been before. With Lily’s help, she propped herself into a sitting position and wiped sweat from her brow.

“Thank ye, thank ye,” she breathed. “How did ye know what tae dae?”

“I’ve haed some experience with wounds,” Captain Baxter said, and the corners of his lips twitched into a slight smile. It only lasted a moment, and the expression was gone before she had a chance to enjoy it properly, but it was the first time he had smiled at her since they had met, and it added another layer to his mystery. “I told ye

that the sea could be a danger, but I didnae think ye would get hurt by something like this.”

“It was that fool. He pulled her away, and then he goes and faints,” Angus said with a heavy sigh, shaking his head.

Hollie tore her gaze away from the captain and looked at her betrothed, who was being helped up by a few of the sailors. Jacques was groggy, and it took a few moments for him to regain his senses. Hollie was worried about him, but she also felt betrayed by the way he acted. Captain Baxter offered a hand to help her up. It was the same hand she squeezed. She saw the red marks left by her fingers as they had clamped around it, and she felt a little ashamed that she had caused him so much pain.

As their flesh met, she noticed how both their hands were calloused now after she had worked on the boat, and the warmth that flooded between them didn’t escape her attention either. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, it felt as though the rest of the surroundings were melting away and she was alone with him. It almost felt as though she could finally ask him everything that had been on her mind, but just as her lips parted and she was about to speak, she was unceremoniously pulled away.

“Unhand my betrothed!” Jacques cried out.

He was now on his feet again, having apparently recovered from his faint spell. He grabbed Hollie’s arm and wrenched her hand away from Captain Baxter. It was almost enough to make her lose her balance and send her flying again, but this time she managed to regain her equilibrium. The other sailors had stabilized the sail. Angus was currently tying it together, his biceps swelling as he pulled the ropes taut. As Jacques’s hands wrapped around her forearm, Hollie noticed how unlike Captain Baxter he was. His hands were slender and feminine, and she wondered if he had ever done anything resembling hard work in all his life.

Jacques rounded on her and rebuked her. “What do you think you’re doing being out here? I told you that you shouldn’t act like a sailor. You’re not a sailor. You’re better than them. You should be in your cabin awaiting our arrival to France. I don’t know why you disobeyed me in the first place. It’s going to be a very long marriage if this is the attitude you’re going to display, but I should hope this teaches you a lesson.”

Hollie was about to speak, but Captain Baxter's tongue was quicker.

"According to my men, she would nae hae been in danger if ye haed nae pulled her away," he said.

Jacques narrowed his eyes. "She wouldn't have been in danger at all if you kept a closer watch on what was happening on your own ship. She should never have been allowed to do this kind of task."

"She's only helping out. In fact, I welcome it. It's a shame that nae all my passengers show their skill or willingness tae help," Captain Baxter shot back. The veiled threat was not very subtle at all, but Hollie was not about to leap to the defense of her betrothed when he had fainted at the sight of her blood. There was nothing stopping him from helping out on the ship except his own shortcomings.

"We are not here to help you. We are not members of this crew. We are the passengers, and I do not expect to be treated this way. You are doing your reputation no favors, Captain Baxter," Jacques said. Hollie noticed how he continued to address the captain by his proper title.

"Aye, well, speaking of reputations, I assume ye would nae want word tae get out about what happened here. What kind of person is gaeing tae want a doctor who faints at the sight of blood?" Captain Baxter said with an arched eyebrow.

Jacques became incandescent with rage, and Hollie thought that he was going to burst into flames in an instant. He trembled with anger, but he had no way to rebut Captain Baxter's point as everyone had seen him faint, and for a professed doctor, it was a shameful thing indeed.

"I need to return to my studies," Jacques said, and then let his cold gaze fall upon Hollie. "I don't expect to be disturbed again, and I don't want this to happen again either."

Hollie wondered if he would find some way to blame his fainting on her as well. She sighed and nodded as he marched away, retreating to the safety of his cabin and his studies. Captain Baxter wore a smug grin while his crew tittered with laughter. Hollie knew she should have leaped to the defense of her betrothed, but after the way he had rebuked her and chastised her like a naughty child, she was lacking in sympathy for him. She decided to let him suffer in peace for now while she recovered from the sudden ordeal she had been subjected

to.

Hollie turned around and noticed that Lily was inching closer to Angus, casting an admiring glance toward his muscles. Now Hollie understood one of Lily's motives to come back on the ship, and she allowed herself a small smile as the maid put her own desires first once she had made sure that Hollie was going to be well.

"Would ye teach me how tae tie these knots?" Lily asked.

Angus grunted and smiled. It seemed as though the attraction was mutual. Hollie left them to it because she noticed that Captain Baxter was already moving away, slinking back to the solitude that he so often found himself in. Before he could leave, however, she reached out and grabbed his hand.

"Captain," she said to get his attention. "I wanted tae thank ye for what ye did. Ye saved me."

She expected some pithy remark from him, but instead, he remained silent. He nodded slightly and then averted his gaze, almost as though he was afraid of looking directly at her, although she couldn't imagine a man like him being afraid of anything.

Hollie decided to return to her cabin and rest. The pain continued to throb, and it would do so for a while yet. There was much on her mind as well. Her skin crawled with revulsion as she thought of the way Jacques had treated her. She felt entirely disconnected from him as she wondered what kind of future they were going to have if he was so strongly against her expressing any sign of initiative or individuality.

The gratitude in her heart was reserved for Captain Baxter. He was the one who had come to her in her time of need; he was her savior. And yet, what was the use of being drawn to him? As soon as they reached France, their time together would be at an end, and she would go off to be married to Jacques while he would continue to captain ships and sail around the world. They would be little more than a footnote in each other's lives, but she wondered if he would think of her as fondly as she thought of him.

The sea stretched all around them, and there was no land in sight. It was as though they were an island unto themselves. There was something dangerous about knowing that they were alone. The noises they made faded into the ether and would not become even a whisper to another ear either. They were alone with each other in a strangely intimate way. Despite this boat being bigger than the first, it actually felt smaller and more cramped because there were more people. The sailors slept in huge empty holds where hammocks were strung up between wooden beams. Hollie had seen them once, and that was enough. The smell was musky, and she gagged on the air as sweat and ale mixed together. It was easier to spend time up on deck, where she quickly became used to the briny smell of the ocean. There was no way to escape it. It clung to her clothes and seeped into her flesh.

They ate bread and dried meat, as well as cheese. The food was simple. Barrels of fresh water were rationed out, and most of the men drank ale. The rudimentary diet never seemed to be enough to satisfy her hunger, and it was no wonder that the sailors all had lean, toned bodies, for they ate only what was necessary. Fruit was shared around as well, which helped break up the stale taste of the other food. Sometimes it was difficult to tell the days apart when the scenery around them did not change.

For Hollie, Lily, and Jacques, life was a little different. They had their own cabins and thus had the opportunity to escape from the stale smell of the ship. Jacques rarely emerged from his cabin, and Hollie overheard more than one sailor expressing their resentment for the man. She was still the recipient of much goodwill after her injury, as though she had become one of them. She was proud of this and

held her head high whenever she walked across the deck, but there was still one man whose opinion she rated highest of all and who was still silent with any praise he might have had for her.

She was on deck one day when suddenly the doors to Jacques's cabin burst open, and he sprinted out, flinging his arms across the side of the boat and vomiting out the contents of his stomach. He looked groggy and was unnaturally pale. Hollie herself had felt some dizziness, especially when the ship met a particularly hostile wave, but as yet, her stomach had not betrayed her. There wasn't any sympathy for Jacques. In fact, there was only derision.

He wiped his mouth and groaned as he stumbled back to his quarters, swaying along with the ship, almost losing his balance before disappearing into the shadows again. Hollie heard many of the crew mention how not only could the doctor not handle the sight of blood, but that he couldn't handle the sway of the sea either. It didn't paint Jacques in a very good light, and Hollie wondered what other frailties the man might have had.

Given that she was still his betrothed, she thought it was her duty to go and see him. She ventured down the stairs and rapped her knuckles against his cabin door, calling out to him. Jacques cried out loudly, though, and told her to leave him alone. He sounded as though he was in pain, and her instinct was to go and help him, but when she tried to open the door, she found it to be locked. He warned her again, and this time she heeded the warning.

It felt as though she was a part of an impossible situation. She was betrothed to a man who didn't want to spend any time with her and fascinated with a man who remained a mystery to her. This wasn't how she imagined the voyage going at all, and she wondered what it meant for the rest of her life.

As the sun bled across the horizon and the crew started to wind down for the night, Hollie stood at the prow of the ship, gazing out at infinity. Behind her, she heard movement and turned to find Captain Baxter standing there, looking uncomfortable.

Hollie chuckled to herself. "Ye dinnae hae tae worry. I'm nae here tae trap ye. I was just looking out at the sunset for a while, but I'll leave ye in peace. I know how ye like tae stand here at night," she said, and began to move away.

"Ye dinnae hae tae leave," the captain said, which took her by

surprise. Hollie glanced at him to see if he was actually being genuine in his sentiment, but she saw no sign of deception in his eyes. She lay her arms across the side of the ship and gave her weight to it, almost as though for this brief moment, she became a part of the ship. Captain Baxter came to join her, standing a few inches beside her. Despite the salt and the brine being the overwhelming smells on the ship, there was something else about him that toyed with her senses.

They stood there in silence for a little while, and when Hollie spoke, her voice was gentle.

“What is it ye think about when ye stand out here?” she asked. “I hope ye dinnae mind me asking, but it’s something that I’ve been wondering since I arrived on board.”

Captain Baxter pursed his lips before he answered. “I suppose I dinnae think of anything. I just like listening tae the wind.”

“The wind?”

“Aye. Someone...someone once told me that life was like the wind. I try and take time tae listen tae it, tae see if it’s gaeing tae tell me where it’s gaeing tae blow next.”

Hollie nodded, finding some profound meaning in his words.

“How is the arm?” he asked.

“It’s well again,” she said, flexing it as if to prove that it wasn’t causing her pain, although she still felt a slight twinge when she moved it. “Thank ye again for what ye did, Captain.”

“Ye dinnae need tae thank me. I just did what any man would dae. And please, when it’s at night like this, ye can call me Jamie.”

Hollie smiled softly. “It’s nae what *any* man would dae,” she said pointedly. There was no mystery regarding who she was referring to.

“Yer betrothed is certainly a unique man. I’m nae sure I’ve ever known a doctor tae faint at the sight of blood. Can I ask ye a question? Why are ye marrying him?”

To anyone else, Hollie might well have been indignant at the question, but this was the first chance she had had to have a real conversation with the man, and she wasn’t going to let it slip by. Besides, she hoped that by revealing some of her own inner thoughts, she might coax a few of his out as well.

“It’s quite simple, really. It’s because it’s what my da wants me tae dae. He haes arranged the marriage, and it will afford our family some great benefits.”

“But what about ye?” he asked.

“I...I will hae a good life in France. I will hae children and begin a family of my own, and one day I will send a daughter away tae get married as well. It is simply the way of the world, and my da never tried tae hide the fact from me.”

“Seems cruel tae me, tae raise a child and then tell them what they hae tae dae and where they hae tae gae. Wouldnae ye rather marry someone of yer own choice?”

“I suppose, but that would nae dae my family any good, would it? Did yer parents allow ye tae be a sailor, or did ye choose this for yerself?”

For a moment, he became hard, as though the air around him became like ice. “I chose this life for myself, and I would nae change anything. I dinnae hae tae be beholden tae anyone out here. It’s just me and my crew, and that’s the way I like it.”

“Until ye get troublesome passengers,” Hollie said. It helped to diffuse the tension, and Jamie laughed as well.

“Aye, until then,” he agreed.

“Ye must hae a great many stories tae tell. This is my first time on a ship, but when I grew up, I always dreamed of adventure. Ye live the kind of life they write books about.”

“I dinnae know if I’m the subject of any books. Mostly I just ferry people about and trade in cargo. It’s an honest life, I suppose...well, most of the time.” He gave her a wink as he said this, and her heart fluttered.

“Dinnae ye ever gae home?”

“Ye are supposing I hae a home tae gae tae,” he said. “The sea is my home. Out here, on the waves, this is when I am at peace. The ship, my crew, they’re my family. Ye know, there are some men who dinnae fit intae the world. I tried once, a long time ago, but it was nae for me. I’m nae like yer betrothed there. I cannae lock myself in a room with a book for hours on end, nor can I manage a business like his da.” There was a crack in his voice when he said this, although she wasn’t sure what had caused it. “It seems tae me that as the years gae by, there are more and more rules placed upon people, and I dinnae want any of that. I’d rather be out here, sailing tae the ends of the world than sitting in some manor somewhere beside a fire.”

Hollie tilted her head. “Dinnae ye want a family?”

Jamie wore a sad smile. He turned his head to face her properly, and she caught full sight of his piercing blue eyes and the scar that ran from his eyebrow to his cheek. "That's what I'm trying tae tell ye, lass. Those kinds of things aren't meant for men like me. We're all lost souls, drifting out here alone, but one day, when ye are bouncing a wee baby on yer knee, spare a thought for me. Might be that I'm still out here under the stars, might be that I'm, well..." He let his gaze fall to the dark ocean below. "But ye can be sure that I lived life on my own terms. I never compromised for anything, and I never haed tae become less than myself. As long as I stay true tae that, then I can be happy," he said.

With that, he took his leave of her, and she was left to stare at him as he disappeared into the darkness of the night. Even though it was the most she had spoken to him since boarding the first ship, she was left with more questions than before, and she wondered what kind of upbringing had this man had for him to want to turn his back on the world. What had happened in his life to cast shadows in his heart?

As she gazed into the water, she felt something stirring in her heart, something entirely troublesome indeed. She could sense a conflict about to begin within her heart, and she wasn't sure she was going to succeed.

It had been a peculiar trip and had not unfolded in the way Hollie had expected. Instead of using the opportunity to grow closer to her betrothed, she had instead begun to develop feelings for Captain Baxter, for *Jamie*. There was no denying the stirring excitement that swirled within her like a tempest, nor the warm, honeyed feeling that made her cheeks glow. She had not yet confided in anyone else about these feelings for fear that it would only cause trouble. After all, it wasn't as though she could change her destiny. She was to be married to Jacques, and that was the end of the matter. She had a duty to her family, and that could not change now. Indeed, it might well have been a curse for her to follow her instinct toward Jamie because it would only torture her. She was not about to throw away her virtue on a whim, but the matter did certainly play on her mind.

He was like nobody she had ever known. Her world had always been defined by certain rules, yet he flouted these rules at every opportunity. He lived on his own terms, and while she had never disputed the duties she needed to perform, there was a part of her that wished she could change things for the better. It would have been nice, for example, to have more of a say in whom she was going to marry rather than having the decision made for her, especially since Jacques turned out to be something less than she expected. It wasn't even that she wanted to flee and throw herself into the arms of Jamie anyway since he didn't seem like the domesticated type. What kind of life would it be to be married to a sea captain? Being on a voyage to France was one thing, but living on a ship every day, putting up with the smell and the cramped space and the endless roll of the waves did not appeal to her, not when she knew the joys of sitting in a room with the windows open. She could almost smell the flowery scent in

the breeze, but the sensation quickly faded and was replaced by the usual smell of brine.

No, it was more the idea of Jamie that she was attracted to, this attitude of living life on his own terms no matter what. He made his own rules, and yet he was kind too. He had saved her while Jacques had fainted.

“Is it tae much tae ask for the man I’m supposed tae marry tae defend me?” Hollie said aloud one evening while these thoughts were playing on her mind. Lily was awake too, and their words were soft as they passed between them in the cabin.

“I think there are other ways tae defend ye than what he did,” Lily said, still speaking in favor of the marriage. “When ye are in France, he will defend ye by haeing money tae spend.”

Hollie pursed her lips. “But what about when I’m wounded? What about when I need him tae be gentle? I’m worried that Jacques doesnae hae it in him.” She skirted around saying that Captain Baxter did, for that was not the conversation she wanted to have.

Lily exhaled softly. “I cannae deny the fact that Jacques is a strange man. Then again, I hae always heard that the French are a strange people. He seems strained by being on the ship. I’m sure things will be different when ye are in a home taegether on solid ground. Jacques doesnae seem the type tae enjoy life at sea. I’m sure he doesnae mean anything by it.”

Hollie didn’t find herself being reassured by the words. “I just wonder if this is for the best.”

“If ye cannae trust in the man Jacques seems tae be, then at least trust in yer da’s judgment. He wouldnae hae sent ye tae marry this man if he didnae think it was the best thing for ye. I know things are strange at the moment, but I’m sure they will change once we reach France. And when Jacques becomes a doctor, ye will live a privileged life.”

It was a nice future that Lily painted with her words, but Hollie wasn’t sure she believed it was ever going to arrive. While Jacques took his studies seriously, he fainted at the sight of blood, and no amount of studying was going to stop him from doing this.

Hollie sighed and closed her eyes, trying to surrender to sleep. It felt as though her destiny was finely balanced, and she only had a finite time to save herself before the choice was taken from her. Was

she supposed to be like a ship on the sea and let the current take her where it wanted to go or was she supposed to fight against it with every ounce of strength she had and forge a new path?



WHILE HOLLIE HAD STOPPED HELPING out on the boat as much as she had because of the injury she had sustained, she still spent a lot of time with the crew. They were a bawdy lot, making crude jokes even in front of a lady. Hollie was shocked, but she couldn't help laughing. At first, Lily had been aghast that Hollie would behave like this, but there really wasn't anything else to do to while the time away, and even Lily began enjoying the time with the crew, especially when Angus was around. There was something in the air between them, something that made Lily come alive in a way that Hollie had never seen before.

Spending time with Jamie was also a more frequent occurrence as well. When they were joking around with the crew, he would normally remain distant, but she would often seek him out for a private conversation. She probed for information about his past, but he would never speak about his youth, only his time at sea. Sometimes they would just stand together and gaze out at the horizon. It was quiet and calm, and these were moments she cherished.

One day, she noticed that Jamie was peering away from the ship with a looking glass in his hands. Hollie had never seen one before and was quite taken with the instrument. It was made of gleaming gold, and an intricate pattern had been etched around the metal. She walked up with a look of awe on her face. When Jamie saw her, he smiled and offered it to her. It was heavier than she imagined, and he helped her keep it steady as she pressed the cool metal to her eye.

Suddenly the horizon loomed large before her, as though it had rushed forward instantly. She made out the detail of the froth on a distant wave and a small sea creature bursting out of the sea, flipping in the air, and then submerging again. She giggled and moved the spyglass around. Jamie stood behind her, his presence warm and comforting. One hand was placed on the spyglass while the other rested on her shoulder. It was an innocuous touch, yet it was one that tied her stomach in knots.

“If ye look over there, ye might see something interesting,” he whispered, his breath warm as it washed over the nape of her neck. Tingles spread across her skin, and she felt weak at the knees. He turned her around a few degrees, and then she saw what he had been talking about. It was a large beast, blue in color, that was almost lost against the landscape of the sea and the sky. Its huge tail beat against the sea and created a wave that careened out past it while a jet of water sprayed out of the top of its head, or body. It was difficult to tell where the body ended and the head began, if indeed there was anything that separated the two.

“What is it?” Hollie breathed in wonder.

“It’s called a whale. It’s the biggest creature I’ve ever seen. Ye might think it’s huge from this distance, but when ye see it up close, it’s like a giant,” he said.

“We’re nae gaeing near it, are we? Is it dangerous?”

Jamie chuckled. “I told ye before, everything at sea is dangerous. That whale could destroy any boat I’ve ever seen with a simple flick of its tail. But if it did, it would be an accident. These whales are nae violent, they’re just powerful. It doesnae look as though it’s taking the same path as we are, sae we will nae be getting closer, which is a shame because it’s a real sight tae see.”

Hollie was at first relieved to hear that they wouldn’t be going near this creature that had the ability to destroy the ship, but she was a little saddened that she wouldn’t get to see it up close. It was an experience that would be denied to her for all time, and she started to wonder what else the sea held that she would never see. It was a world unto itself. The sea was a writhing, undulating thing that thrived with all manner of strange beings, and it must have taken a strong man to bear witness to it all and survive. Her respect for Jamie increased.

“What other things hae ye seen like the whale?” she asked. As she did so, she turned to face him, still holding the spyglass to her eye. It made everything in the boat look gigantic, including Jamie himself. For a moment, she was focused on his face and saw the way he looked at her. There was something touching about it, and the intensity that burned in his eyes startled her to such an extent that she turned away, swinging the spyglass to the side. Her vision ran across the deck and then saw a terrifying sight as Jacques marched toward them. The

spyglass showed every inch of his fury.

She pulled the spyglass away and handed it back to Jamie as Jacques approached, and she wondered what had made him angry now. She hoped to defuse him with a sweet smile and kind words.

“Jacques, it’s sae good tae see ye out of yer cabin. Are ye feeling better?” she asked. As Jacques grew closer, Hollie could see there was still a greenish pallor to his cheeks, and his eyes were bloodshot. He certainly didn’t look like he should be walking around, but his own condition was apparently the last thing on his mind.

“Better?” he spat. “Of course I’m not feeling better. I come out here and find you standing with him. All the time I see you talking with him. You’re supposed to become my wife, and I can’t have you speaking with other men. I thought you were supposed to be a lady,” he said in a scathing tone.

“Now hold on, Jacques, ye cannae blame her for wanting tae liven up her days. It’s nae as though there’s much tae occupy her time, especially when ye stay in yer cabin,” Jamie said, coming to her defense yet again.

Jacques turned his ire toward Jamie, scowling at him deeply and lowering his voice. “And you...you who call yourself a captain? I know what kind of man you are, and I’m not afraid to tell you. You’re a...you’re a scoundrel! There’s nothing noble in your heart. That’s why you’re out here on this ship, living this wretched life rather than making a name for yourself in the civilized world.”

“Aye, just like ye are? Having yer da open every door for ye because of his connections?” Jamie shot back.

“Don’t you dare speak about my father,” Jacques said, and then cursed Jamie using a French word that Hollie did not understand.

“Jacques, please, there’s no reason tae be upset. It’s just as Jamie said; I’m only out here tae pass the time. It’s a long voyage, and when I’m just sitting alone, I find myself losing my mind,” Hollie said.

Jacques snarled. “You should know better than to spend time with these uncouth men. I’ve heard the songs they sing and the stories they tell. They’re not refined enough for a lady, and if you truly do enjoy them, then perhaps you’re not the woman that was promised to me. I have always heard that Highlanders are rough and savage. I had hoped you would be different, but no matter, there’s still time for you to learn. I’m not going to have you out here with these men any

longer. You can spend the rest of the voyage in your cabin and think about what kind of wife you wish to be.” As he said this, he shot his arm out and dragged Hollie back toward the cabin. Despite his ill state, he was still quite strong, and his grip was determined. Hollie was so taken aback by his words that she lacked the strength to resist at first. She felt herself being pulled across the deck, and he was pulling her injured arm as well so the pain that lanced down was intense.

“Jacques! Stop it! Ye are hurting me!” she cried out, but Jacques had no intention of listening to her until she was back in her cabin.

Jamie thundered toward them and tore Jacques’s hand away. Hollie cradled her wounded arm and blinked away tears of pain.

“What dae ye think ye are daeing? Ye cannae treat her like that,” Jamie cried out. Later, Hollie wondered whether this was a captain standing up to maintain order on his ship or if there was something more to it, but in the moment, she was swept away in the chaos of it all.

“I can treat her however I wish. She is my betrothed, after all, and she will behave as I want her to behave. You might rule over this crew, but *she* is mine,” Jacques said bitterly. Although Hollie had been cold to him so far, now she found herself actually afraid of him.

“Jacques, please dinnae dae this,” she said weakly.

Anger poured forth from Jacques’s eyes, and he radiated with a terrible fury. “I will not have a wife of mine speak back to me! You will not defy me!” he said, and raised his hand to hit her.

Hollie recoiled and braced herself for the impact, but before she felt Jacques’s hand strike her, something else happened. Jamie lunged forward and slammed his fist into Jacques’s face. Jacques staggered back and held his nose as blood poured from it. He looked stunned, as though he couldn’t quite believe anyone would have the audacity to lay hands on him in such a manner. Blood trickled onto the deck, and Hollie became deeply afraid of what Jacques was going to do next.

Jacques stood there like a wounded wolf. His breathing was heavy, and he radiated anger. It must have been this anger and only this anger that prevented him from fainting as he had done before, although he did show signs of losing consciousness. Hollie found herself wishing that he would slump to the deck again, but alas, he managed to hold on, even though the pallor on his face was deathly. Jamie had his hands clenched by his sides while Hollie was still holding her arm, trying to think of something to say that might help calm the situation. It didn't seem as though there was anything that would make Jacques back down, though. His gaze cut through the air and shot straight toward Jamie.

"How dare you hit me like this! You have just made a grave error, Jamie. I have given you much leeway and much respect during our time together because this is your ship, but now you're about to see how wrong you have been." Jacques raised his voice at this to address the entire crew, who had now gathered on the deck as word of the dispute had traveled quickly through the ship. "You all know that my father is Antoine Buchelle. He is a wealthy man. That means that *I* am a wealthy man. I'm sure you all dream of having your own ship, your own prospects. I will make sure that you have anything you desire once we reach France if you do my bidding and take this man and put him in chains," Jacques sneered.

There was nowhere to escape for anyone, and Hollie worried about what would happen if a fight broke out on the boat. If there was too much damage, she was afraid that the boat would crack in two and begin to sink. This whole thing was madness, but she could not stop it.

There were some men who formed a line behind Jacques at his promise of riches, while other men remained loyal to Jamie.

“That’s nae gaeing tae happen!” Angus cried out. “Ye cannae buy a crew’s loyalty with gold.”

“It seems I can,” Jacques replied, casting a glance at the men joining him. He wiped another line of blood away from his face. The crimson stain left behind made his face appear even paler than it already was.

“Then ye will hae a fight,” Angus replied, and the other loyal men nodded in agreement.

“Nay!” Jamie said, stepping forward toward Jacques. “Ye are right, Jacques. I should nae hae hit ye like that. Take me and dae as ye wish. I would nae want tae see the ship harmed,” Jamie said, although as he spoke, he glanced at Hollie, and she began to wonder if he was actually doing this to prevent her from being harmed.

Jacques was smug, as though he had just outwitted Jamie completely. Jacques’s men clamped chains around his wrists and led him down into the ship. It was a painful sight to see the captain treated like this, and Hollie wished she had never been there to witness it. It seemed wrong. Jacques was completely overreacting, but there was nothing she could do to stop his tantrum. He still hadn’t come to his senses about her either.

“As for you, let’s hope that some time in your cabin will do you some good,” he said as he grabbed her himself. Jamie’s men could only watch on as she and Hollie were pulled down back to their cabin and thrown inside. The door was locked behind them. She had been made a prisoner by the man who was supposed to become her husband, and there was no doubt in her mind now that she could not marry Jacques.



THE HOURS HAD PASSED SLOWLY. Hollie could feel herself going insane as the ship lolled from side to side. One of Jacques’s men came to give them a rudimentary dinner, and Jacques was absent.

“I cannae marry him now. He’s gone quite mad,” Hollie said.

“Perhaps it’s the sickness that haes taken hold of him. He was ill, and sometimes these afflictions can affect the mind as well as the body,” Lily said.

“Something tells me that his heart haes always been cruel. I wish

he were more like Jamie,” she said, finally hinting at her true feelings. In the shadows of the cabin, her blushed cheeks were hidden.

“Ye should nae say such things, lass. The captain is nae a better man for a lady like ye.”

“A lady like me should condemn myself tae a life with a man who treats me like a prisoner?” Hollie asked.

Lily did not have a response. They remained in silence for a time before Hollie started to hear noises. There were shouts and clanking chains and cries of pain. It sounded like complete bedlam, and she rose to stand by the door, pressing her ear against it in the hope that she might be able to parse what was happening. Then she heard the clatter of footsteps approach and stepped back. The door was flung open, and she expected the worst. What if Jacques had truly lost his mind and saw her as the enemy along with Jacques? He might well decide that it was too much of a risk to keep her around.

In the shadows, she didn’t recognize the man who grabbed her and Lily and pulled them from the cabin. Hollie tried to speak, but they didn’t reply. By now, the shadows of the night played upon the ship’s deck. Hollie emerged to a surprising sight; Jamie was standing free while Jacques was on his knees in chains, along with the men he came with and the rest of the men that chose to abandon Jamie for the promise of riches. Elation burst in Hollie’s heart and a smile played on her face, but the smile was short-lived as she was guided beyond Jamie to where Jacques was sitting and forced to join her betrothed. Cold chains were clamped around her wrist, and she stared at Jamie, who made a point of not looking at her.

“You will never get away with this, you wretch! Do you know who I am? My father will hunt you down and tear you limb from limb! He’ll kill you a hundred times over before he’s done with you!” Jacques screamed at the top of his lungs, although Jamie didn’t seem afraid at all.

“I’m sure yer da and I will hae words when I ransom ye. Ye were never gaeing tae make it back tae him freely, Jacques. But thank ye for the bigger boat and the extra men,” Jamie replied.

“And what about me?” Hollie cried, her words trembling with emotion. Jacques looked at her almost as though she was an afterthought, while Jamie’s shoulders slumped and his head hung down. As he was cast in the ethereal moonlight, she could almost

believe that he was filled with sorrow.

“I didnae mean for ye tae get involved in this, lass, but ye were the one who chose tae stay. I’m sure this will add tae the ransom Antoine is willing tae pay. I did warn ye the sea was filled with danger.” As he said this, he turned away and left Hollie with a hollow heart.

The air seemed colder than it had been before, and the pain she felt inside was even more intense than what she had experienced from her injury. It was as though she had been punched in the gut, and all the life had been driven from her.

How could Jamie have done this?

When he warned her about the sea, she didn’t think he had been talking about himself! He had shown her a soft side, a kind side, and he had always stood up for her. How could a man who had spent so much time with her now treat her like this? Perhaps she had been naïve, and all of her feelings had been those of a fool. There was a great deal she needed to learn about life, and she was being taught some cruel lessons. The man who was betrothed to be her husband should have been noble but instead was cruel. The captain who had been strong and honorable had proven himself to be a villain when she had thought him a hero.

Tears were in her eyes as she gazed up at the stars and prayed for salvation, but the stars were silent.

“H_e is going to pay for this. He’s going to pay dearly. I

will see his head on a spike. I will see him torn limb from limb. I want every asset he has stripped away so I can see him penniless and destitute in the street. I want him mauled by dogs. I will have my revenge. I will see him dead,” Jacques muttered to himself over and over again. Hollie inched away from him as far as she could, as far as the chains would allow. Jacques rocked back and forth. The stream of words pouring out of his mouth was constant, and it made her fear for the man if he ever got loose, for she did not know what she was capable of. There were monsters all around her, and there was nobody she could trust...nobody except Lily.

Hollie turned toward her maid slowly, looking guilty and shameful. “I’m sorry for leading ye intae this situation,” she said.

“My place is by yer side,” Lily said, although there was hesitation in her voice.

“It’s my fault. I should hae listened tae ye. We should hae returned tae the Highlands.”

“Aye, we should have,” Lily said after a moment. “But what’s done is done now, and I can only hope we make it tae France intact.”

“What dae ye mean?” Hollie asked.

Lily nodded toward the sailors who gathered nearby. They had lustful looks on their faces and made lewd gestures toward the women. Hollie shuddered at the thought of what they were capable of. She began to tell herself that Jamie would never let anything like that happen to them but stopped herself quickly as Jamie wasn’t the man he had presented himself to be.

“I hope ye think twice about making yer mind up about men now,” Lily said.

“If I haed my way, I’ll swear off men. They dinnae seem like anything but trouble. I just wish there was a way tae get word tae Da.”

“I think our only hope now lies with Jacques’s father. If the ransom is paid, at least we’ll be free.”

“Aye, free,” Hollie said in a quiet voice, although she knew that freedom for her would never exist. There may not be visible chains around her wrists, but she would be shackled by Jacques to a life that she didn’t want, with a man who expected her to be little more than a doll. The prospect was not appealing at all, and she wondered if she should instead fling herself off the side of the boat at the first opportunity and embrace the cold water below. It was a grim thought, and she was surprised that she even thought it because life had always been a precious thing to her, yet this was how far she had been driven to despair. Her life was devoid of hope as much as the night sky was devoid of light.

The men continued to call out to them and made suggestive remarks that were not welcomed at all. They were only silenced when Jamie appeared on deck. He said little, but the men respected him and backed away. He got one of them to release the chains of Hollie and Lily from the deck, although their wrists were still clasped in manacles, and took them down to his chamber. Hollie wasn’t sure what he intended, although she thought she might suspect what it was, and it filled her with dread. If her virtue was stolen from, her then Jacques might not want her at all. He might well leave her when they arrived in France, and she would be alone in a strange country, with nothing to her name, not even her innocence.

Jamie opened the door to his cabin and allowed Hollie and Lily to enter. Angus, his loyal second-in-command, was the only other person with them. Jamie’s cabin was larger than even Jacques’s. There was a bed to one side, a large desk that had maps spread out over it, and a shelf filled with books. Candles burned, providing the room with an amber glow.

“I hae brought ye here for yer safety. I know what the men are like, but I’m nae gaeing tae let them get what they want. I’m pretending tae hae ye here for myself, and they will nae dare transgress against Angus and I,” he explained, “but I cannae show them that ye get special treatment.”

He nodded to Angus, who took Lily away to another cabin, leaving Hollie and Jamie alone together. Hollie descended into a chair, relieved that she did not have to be hunched up on the deck any longer, but she was puzzled at this turn of events. Jamie was a difficult man to understand. She wasn't sure she would ever fully know his motives, and she didn't know if she could still trust him. He had betrayed her once before, after all.

"What dae ye want with me?" she asked.

"The truth is I dinnae want anything from ye. I only ever wanted Jacques. Yer presence on the voyage was unexpected. I'm sorry that ye haed tae gae through this. I didnae want tae hurt ye."

"Well, ye hae," Hollie said sullenly. "What actually happened here?"

"When we began the voyage, I was given men who were mostly mercenaries. I could nae trust them. When we stopped off, I recruited men who were loyal tae me. Jacques's ransom is all I care about."

Hollie let out a dry chuckle. Her manacles scraped against the desk as she leaned forward. "Oh, aye, sae it's all about gold. All of this is just for some coin. I suppose ye are naething but a pirate, after all."

"I've been called worse," Jamie said. His voice was calm, and this infuriated her. It was as though he didn't care about anything at all, not even what he had put her through.

"Why Jacques? Why me?"

"Because his da owes me," Jamie replied.

Hollie shook her head, unable to believe that this was all about money. "I'm glad yer debt is sae important that ye would endanger people's lives," she said bitterly.

Jamie remained silent for a few moments and then told her that she would have to stay in this cabin for a while so the crew didn't suspect anything. He offered her the bed, and she took it begrudgingly, and then he left her alone as he went back out on deck.

Hollie grit her teeth as she tried to get herself comfortable, which was difficult because of the manacles. She was confused about why Jamie was showing her this small act of kindness after all he had done. It gave her a little hope that there was still an ounce of heroism in him, although she wondered if that was just a false hope born of her despair, for now, she didn't even have Lily to console her. She was alone, lost in a distant part of the world, and all she wished for was to

be at home with her family again. It was already beginning to feel like such a long time ago.

A day or two passed, and Hollie didn't see much of Jamie. The man barely seemed to sleep at all. He was always out on deck, and whenever he was in the cabin, he rarely spoke with her, which was fine for her as she didn't have anything to say to him. To know that this was all about money made the whole situation seem sad and pitiful. Was that all these men cared about?

She was brought dinner at regular intervals and had plenty of food to eat. She hated the lascivious looks that the crew gave her, though. They thought she had been brought into this cabin to be the captain's concubine. She dreaded to think what their imaginations thought was happening here. It was a small mercy that Jamie was not that type of man, although, in truth, she had no idea what type of man he was. Every time she thought she was certain about him, he showed another side of himself that sent her reeling. She decided she was going to stop it completely and hoped that when she reached France, she would be able to find passage back to Scotland.

On one of Jamie's infrequent visits to his cabin, Hollie decided to confront him because she was growing tired of being locked in this room. It was certainly nicer than the cabin she had been in previously, but it was still just a cabin. She missed the feeling of the breeze through her hair and the sound of the water caressing the hull of the ship.

"Isnae it time for ye tae take these off?" Hollie asked, gesturing to the manacles. "And I dinnae think it would be the worst idea tae be allowed tae wander around the ship. It's nae like I can gae anywhere."

"It's nae safe for ye," Jamie said sternly. "The situation is dangerous. I know what my men are like. Now that they think ye are a prisoner, they've changed the way they look at ye. It's better for ye

if ye stay here.”

“Now ye are starting tae sound like Jacques,” she muttered.

Jamie’s nostrils flared, and he glared at her. “I’m *nothing* like him!” he said, raising his voice to a loud volume. She swore the ship itself trembled with his fury, but she realized that she had pricked his pride, and it felt satisfying to do him some damage rather than suffering by herself.

“Aye, ye may say that, but he wanted me locked up in a cabin, and now ye hae done exactly that.”

Shadows crawled across Jamie’s face, and he clenched his jaw. He looked as though he was considering something inside, and once he made his decision, he came toward her and pulled out a key, unlocking the manacles from her wrists.

“Fine, I’ll take them off, but ye are nae gaeing out on deck. I cannae risk anything unpredictable happening,” he said.

Hollie furrowed her brow and huffed. “I dinnae see why ye are sae worried about me. What dae ye expect I am gaeing tae dae?”

“That’s just it, I dinnae know. I thought ye were gaeing tae sail back tae the Highlands. Then I find that ye hae sneaked back onto my ship, and now we’re in this situation.”

“Oh, so it’s all my fault?” Hollie asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Aye, aye, in a way it is. I never wanted ye tae be involved in this. I only wanted Jacques, but ye could nae heed the warnings. I tried tae be harsh with ye. I tried tae make it plain that ye hae no place on the ship, yet ye still remained! I dinnae know what was gaeing through yer mind, but now we’re here, and I hae tae dae everything I can tae ensure that ye are safe.”

“I can protect myself.” Hollie folded her arms across her chest, digging her hands tightly into her armpits. She didn’t miss the fact that he had just admitted his coldness toward her at the beginning of the voyage was an act to get her to leave. Was the real Jamie Baxter the one that she had spent time with alone, or had that been an act as well?

“I’m nae sure ye care about my safety. If ye did, ye would nae hae put me in chains.”

“Ye are impossible! I hae done everything I can tae keep ye safe. I’m sorry this haes nae gone as ye planned, but I tried tae warn ye.”

“Ye could hae let me in on the plan!”

“Of course, and then ye would hae gone tae warn Jacques.”

“Why would ye think that?” Hollie said. Their voices rose in tandem, as though they were dancing with each other.

“Because he’s gaeing tae be yer husband.”

“Aye, but I dinnae love him!”

It was the first time she had admitted it out loud, and silence descended upon them. Hollie’s words were hushed, and she almost felt ashamed for admitting it because she knew it was wrong, but that didn’t stop it from being the truth. She was scared to look at Jacques, but she almost wanted him to ask her how she knew she didn’t love him or what had made her realize this to be true. She wanted some inkling of his real feelings because she could sense something from him, something that drew her in like the mystery of the sea. The air was thick with tension, and she found herself longing to kiss him despite everything he had put her through. It was complicated and conflicting, and she hated it because none of it made any sense, yet the feelings were plain in her heart, and she could do nothing to combat them.

And then, as he so often did, Jamie left her without saying a word. Either she was completely wrong in her way of thinking, or he prized the mystery of his heart over anything else. She sank down into the bed and groaned, annoyed at herself for being attracted to him, and annoyed at him for being such a maddening man.



THE CONFESSION of Hollie that she didn’t love Jacques came as a surprise to Jamie, so much so that he had to take his leave of her lest he say something he regretted. It was so difficult for him to be with her. Did she understand the intoxicating presence she had over him or the way she made every emotion within him grow taut? He had never known anyone like her, and he wondered why he had been cursed to come across her now when there was such an important mission to be fulfilled. It had almost killed him to put her in chains, and he had been sure that she would never forgive him, but it had been necessary. Every moment that drew them closer had been painful because he had always known what was going to happen, and that she was going to hate him for it. But that was the price to pay. Jacques had been worse

than Jamie imagined. At first, Jacques had seemed like a weak fop who was largely harmless, but over the course of the voyage, he had made his cruelty clear. It was obvious that he was his father's son, and Jamie felt no guilt about putting him through this plight.

But Hollie... Guilt swirled in his heart and made him doubt the course of action he had once been so sure of. It would have been easier had she simply returned to the Highlands when he had ordered her off the boat, but she was stubborn and willful. A smile played across his face as he thought about the qualities that attracted him so fiercely to her. She had an adventurous spirit and seemed to enjoy life on the water. It seemed a waste for her to be left somewhere in a house, neglected by a husband who couldn't appreciate her independent spirit. She wasn't made for the world in the same way that Jamie wasn't made for it. Their spirits were meant to soar, to be carried by the wind. For a moment, he thought there might be a possibility that if he offered her a life here, she might well take it, but he dismissed it almost as quickly as it drifted through his mind. She deserved better than this. She was a lady, she was beautiful, and she deserved a man who was better than Jacques and better than him as well.

Soon enough, this would all be over, and he would not have to plague her life any longer.

During the day, he ignored the lewd comments from his crew about what it was like to have a lady at his beck and call. He also ignored Jacques's protests and threats, for he knew they were empty. It wouldn't be long now before they saw the coast, and then it would be time for the final part of his mission, a part he had been waiting for all his life. He almost wished that he would tell Hollie the truth. Perhaps she would see him differently if she knew he was doing this to avenge his parents, but as it was, she thought him a greedy mercenary. Perhaps it was better that way. Perhaps she would finally leave and have a second chance at happiness.

He returned to his cabin and went to check on Hollie. As he stood over her, he imagined for a moment another life that he might have, one that was filled with joy and love. It was a life that had been stolen from him a long time ago by Antoine Buchelle.

Then there was a twisting movement and a flash of silver as Hollie moved around, wielding a knife. She dragged him down to the bed

and pressed the tip of the dagger against his neck. Her body was pressed against him, and her sweet, warm breath rippled across his flesh.

“I told ye I could protect myself,” she said.

Jamie clenched his jaw and gazed into her eyes. He didn’t think he had ever seen anyone more beautiful than she was in that moment. His hands stretched out over her arms and back, and something shifted in her eyes. The air between them was hot and crackling, and the weight of her upon him was a pleasant feeling. It was as though a tight knot inside him had been loosened, and he found himself unable to stop from indulging his desire.

He twisted the knife away from her. It dropped to the floor with a clink. He brushed an errant strand of hair away from her face and then leaned closer, plucking a kiss from her lips. He felt the tentative emotion on her, which gave way as she yielded to his passion. Soft moans burst through the air as they kissed, and hot passion surged through their bodies. It was a moment of weakness for him, but it was a brief moment of joy that had been all too rare in his cursed life, and he knew it was a moment that would stay with him forever.

Hollie awoke and felt entirely confused. Jamie was nowhere to be found. In fact, he had left shortly after they had kissed. Even now, she wondered if it had been a dream, but when she brought her fingers to her lips, she could feel the lingering warmth that had scorched her. It was the first kiss she had ever received, and it had left her reeling. When Jamie had returned, she had the intention of threatening him with the knife, but he had quickly tamed that threat. Instead, he had awakened something inside her, something that was deep and primal and warm. She could feel it now, simmering under the surface of her flesh. All she wanted was to be with him again, to be beside him and speak with him about what had happened. The kiss had been tender and firm, and it filled every empty part of her. It was as though dawn had broken on a new day, and she was seeing everything in a new light.

Yet she was still locked in the cabin.

She was still a prisoner.

Was this all some game to him? Was he trying to seduce her so that she would give him her virtue willingly, or had he genuinely developed feelings for her? All she wanted was some clarity, although she didn't think that she was going to get it from Jamie.

When Jamie returned, she half expected him to fling his arms around her and draw her into another embrace, a prospect that wouldn't have been entirely unappealing to her. However, he kept his distance and had a pensive look on his face.

"I hae some news. We are approaching the coast. I'm gaeing tae send a message tae Antoine Buchelle for the ransom. Ye will soon be free of me," Jamie said.

The first instinct that filled Hollie's heart was one of horror. She

didn't feel ready to leave yet.

"But there is nothing for me in France," Hollie said. "I know nobody. Are ye gaeing tae condemn me tae a life with Jacques?"

"He is yer betrothed," Jamie said, but even Hollie could see that he was conflicted. "I shall try and make arrangements for ye. Ye can return tae the Highlands and put this behind ye. It'll be like it never happened."

"Is that what ye want, Jamie? Tae pretend like it never happened? Tae pretend like last night never happened?" she challenged.

Emotions shifted across Jamie's face. "Last night was a mistake. It was late. I was tired. I was weak. I should nae hae done it. Yer virtue is worth more than what a pirate like I can give."

"My virtue is worth what I decide," Hollie said, but her words fell on deaf ears. The decision had been made. It was another decision that had been made for her without any say on her part, and she grew frustrated with Jamie again. But he did have some good news for her; he was going to allow her to see Lily.



THE TWO WOMEN reunited with a tight hug.

"How hae ye been treated?" Hollie asked, for she wanted to know if Jamie was treating Lily as well as he was treating her. Lily blushed and averted her gaze.

"Well, ye should know that something haes happened," she said.

"What?" Hollie asked.

Lily blushed. "Well, Angus and I got tae talking, and it appears as though these sailors weren't as unappealing as I first thought. He's a very sensitive man, actually, and the more I got to know him...well...I was scared one night, and he was there tae comfort me, and we, well, we got close." She leaned in and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I let him have his way with me," she said.

Hollie gasped and recoiled in shock, although a part of her was actually a little jealous. "Are ye speaking the truth?"

Lily nodded. "I just could nae resist him. He's sae manly. I thought I would never find a man like him again, and since I dinnae know what's gaeing tae happen tae us, I thought I should experience a wee bit of joy."

“Aye, well, I haed a wee bit of something as well,” Hollie said.

“Ye never! The captain?” Lily asked.

Hollie nodded, although she quickly dispelled any notion Lily might have that Hollie had allowed Jamie to take her virtue. It was a sad state of affairs where the virtue of a girl like Hollie was worth more because of her standing in the world and the standing of her family. Lily could afford to be freer with her choices and her body because there wasn't as much riding on it. Hollie had to remember that her family's prospects relied on her being virtuous.

“We haed an argument last night, and then he kissed me!” Hollie said.

“Oh, aye? And what happened then?”

“Nothing happened then. He left,” Hollie said, unable to hide her disappointment from her maid. “I hoped he would be open tae talking more about it, but I dinnae know how he feels. He told me that he is gaeing tae try and make arrangements for us tae return tae the Highlands, but if he doesnae succeed, then I may end up with Jacques.”

“Then I pray that we are given passage tae the Highlands.”

“Ye hae changed yer opinion? I thought ye were still holding out hope that Jacques would prove himself tae be an honorable man?”

Lily sighed. “I was trying tae be positive for ye, but even I cannae deny what he haes done. Angus told me that even now he sits there on the deck claiming that he will get vengeance on Jamie. It's a sorry situation.”

“Aye, and I am sorry tae. I know I hae apologized before, but I fear I can never apologize enough for what haes happened. If it was nae for me, we would be well back in the Highlands now,” Hollie said.

A wicked smile flickered upon Lily's face. “Aye, but then I would nae hae met Angus. Sometimes in the world, things dae work out for the best.”

“Ye really are taken with him,” Hollie said.

Lily blushed and nodded.

While Hollie was happy for her friend, she also wished that she could feel something along similar lines. It would have been easier had Jamie been open with his feelings or if Jacques had been the man she hoped he would be.

“Dae ye know why Jamie is daeing this?” Lily asked.

“For gold,” Hollie said despondently. “He wants tae ransom Jacques off, and we’re caught in the middle of it. He might decide tae ransom us off as well, or he might show mercy and arrange passage for us back home. Either way, our time on the ship will soon be over.”

Hollie wasn’t sure she wanted it to be over. There seemed to be unfinished business for her and Jamie to decide, yet he didn’t seem to be interested in it at all. She vacillated between being certain of his feelings and being unsure. The kiss suggested a deep passion burning his blood, driven into his bones, but the way he was acting toward her suggested that he didn’t care that much for her at all. He was so willing to callously toss her aside and throw her back to the wolves of life, back away from the unwavering fathoms of the sea, that she wondered if she meant anything to him whatsoever. Was she just a passing fancy? A way to keep life interesting while on the voyage? If it hadn’t been for the kiss, she might have found it easier to accept that he held nothing special for her, but that kiss...that kiss that tortured her and plagued her and lingered on her mind. There had been so much feeling imbued in that kiss that she couldn’t accept there was nothing between them. A kiss that had such a fierce passion had to mean something; otherwise, she wasn’t sure what a loving kiss could be.

There were so many ideas about love and life she had had before she came on this voyage. They had all been dispelled, and she was learning new lessons all the time, but she was not yet ready for her education to be cut short. To return to the Highlands now would leave her wondering what might have happened had she remained on the ship with Jamie.

But would he ever tell her how he truly felt?



AFTER LILY LEFT, Jamie returned later in the day. She looked at him with wide eyes, imploring him to say the words she wanted to hear.

“We’re approaching the coast. I hae sent word tae Antoine Buchelle, and I hae decided that I will indeed seek arrangements for ye tae return tae the Highlands. Antoine doesnae need tae know that ye are aboard. He can sort the matter out with yer da, if Jacques still wants ye as his wife. But I’ve a feeling it may be a while before

Antoine grants his son a marriage,” Jamie said.

Hollie pressed her lips together in a thin smile. “I dinnae know what tae make of ye, Jamie. When I think ye are nothing but a greedy scoundrel, ye pass up the opportunity tae increase yer ransom by sending me away. It doesnae make sense.”

“Would ye rather me send ye back with Jacques?” he replied.

Hollie remained quiet at this for several seconds before she said, “I just want tae know what lingers in yer heart. I feel like...I feel that there’s something between us, and I want tae know what it is.”

“It’s just an illusion,” Jamie replied bluntly. “Life out here on the sea, it makes ye feel things ye hae never felt before. But it is nae real. Ye were made for a better life than tae stay out here, lass. Ye were made tae hae a home and a family. What could I offer ye? Ye deserve more. Besides, why would ye want tae live in a world filled with danger?”

“The world is always filled with danger, but I suppose I dinnae hae a choice.” She rose from her sitting position and went to stand before him. The closer she got, the more she felt the crackling energy that existed between them. It was as though the air shimmered around them, as though they were the only two people in the world. “Ye like tae think of yerself as a better man than Jacques, but I’m starting tae wonder if all men are the same. I’ve never haed a choice in any of this. I was told I was gaeing tae marry, sae I went tae marry Jacques. I was told tae stay in the cabin, sae I stayed in the cabin. Now I’m told I hae tae return tae the Highlands. Is this all there is for me? Am I never gaeing tae get tae choose the path of my own life?”

“None of us get tae choose that much. Believe me, Hollie, ye are better off being back with yer family. I’m sure yer da will take care of ye. Sometimes it’s better tae let other people make the choice. At least then ye dinnae hae the burden of making a mistake.”

“And what if ye are making a mistake by sending me away, Jamie? Are ye truly gaeing tae deny the kiss?”

Jamie shook his head and sighed heavily. “I could never deny that which meant sae much tae me. At night when I’m standing under the stars, I’ll be looking taewards the Highlands and thinking of ye, but I’ll know that ye are in a better place than here. This is for the best, believe me. Ye dinnae know what kind of man I am.”

“I think I’m beginning tae understand. I just wish ye would give

me the chance tae find out for sure.”

His eyes shimmered, and for a moment, Hollie thought that he was going to kiss her again. She could almost sense that she was so close to making him pour out his feelings, but then once again, he spun away from her and left her alone. It was as though he was determined to remain isolated from everyone else. She sank to the bed and held her head in her hands, devastated that she would never see him again. He promised so much and delivered so little, and for some reason, he seemed to think that she was so much better than him.

She almost wanted to grab him and shake some sense into him because she didn't feel superior. She had no idea what had happened in his past to make him like this, and now she knew she was unlikely to find out. But one thing was for sure: she knew he was not the pirate he claimed to be. If he truly only cared about gold, then he would have tried to sell her life to Antoine Buchelle as well. There was a heart hiding in the forest of his soul, although that knowledge did her little good now.

The days dragged as Hollie waited for word that the ransom had been paid. Jamie was back to ignoring her. If the situation was reversed, she imagined that she would want to spend as much time with him as she could, but he seemed to be able to harden his heart against his own desires. Perhaps it was easier for him to pretend that he didn't feel anything for her. Maybe that was the way it had to be out at sea, pretending that nothing mattered except the water around them all. Life was like the wind, after all; it blew back and forth and never remained in one place.

Hollie heard cries outside of another ship. It was time. Soon enough, Jacques would be delivered back into the hands of his father, and then Hollie would be deposited onto the French coast and would hopefully make it back to Scotland. It had been an arduous journey, and Hollie was not looking forward to the return leg with any sense of anticipation. But her thoughts were thrown asunder as there was a crack of thunder, and then the boat shook. Hollie was thrown from her feet and sprawled across the floor. She gasped with fear as there was a huge splash and the boat rocked again. The door was flung open, and Lily stood there, her face ashen.

"We're under attack!" she cried.

Hollie and Lily made their way up to the top deck, stumbling and staggering on the way as the boat was rocking back and forth. When they emerged, they saw another boat running parallel to theirs. It was a sleek boat and armed to the teeth, with cannons poking out of the side. They rumbled, and smoke shot out. The ship rocked. It was pure odds that the cannonballs were going to hit the ship as there were so many of them. The attack had evidently caught the crew by surprise as they were running around, scrambling to get to their positions.

Angus was straining by the sail, calling to the others to man the guns. Another plume of smoke rose in the air as the guns fired. The smell of ash and gunpowder was heavy, and there was a cry of triumph. Hollie coughed and waved the smoke away. It didn't seem like a triumphant moment as she glanced at the dead bodies strewn over the deck. Rivulets of blood trickled over the ship, dark shadows that were ominous and horrifying.

Jamie was there, barking out orders, leaping back and forth. He barely flinched when the boat was struck, and there wasn't any panic in his voice at all. Hollie didn't understand how he did it. Her heart was racing so much, she thought it was going to burst right out of her chest.

In the middle of it all, Jacques stood there laughing and crowing.

"This is it! I told you that you would pay for what you've done to me! The Buchelles don't pay any ransom! You're a fool, Baxter, a fool!"

"Will someone shut him up!" Angus cried.

Hollie and Lily glanced at each other. They weren't really sure what to do as the cannonballs cracked and thumped into the boat. The rest of the crew were busy on repairs, while others were standing guard over the prisoners just in case they took the opportune moment to escape. Jamie was trying to get the boat to turn as there was nothing to do but run, but the sails were drawn taut, and the man who should have been there was lying prostrate on the ground, blood seeping all around him. Hollie ignored the bile that was rising from her throat and directed Lily to follow her. They nimbly darted across the deck to the mainsail, and Hollie guided Lily on how to unfurl the sails.

Hollie ignored the wincing pain in her arm and unfastened the taut rope. She was acutely aware of the danger this could do, but at least this time, she wasn't going to have Jacques running out to her and interfere in what she was doing. However, there was a battle raging around them, and she almost lost her footing more than once. Sweat trickled down her cheeks as she strained to unfurl the sails. Cannonballs burst through the air, sailing across the boat and landing in the water beyond, creating great splashes. The enemy was aiming for the masts.

If they didn't flee soon, then they might as well surrender, and

Hollie knew that it was all down to her and Lily.



JAMIE WIPED the sweat from his eyes and barked another order at his men. He had anticipated this attack by Antoine, although he had assumed that Antoine would have sent one of the powerful battleships at his disposal, which was why Jamie had insisted on upgrading his ship at the last port in England. Perhaps Antoine had received word, or he had gotten lucky. Although Jamie's ship was mightier, Antoine's ship was smaller and harder to hit. It was packed with cannons as well, and there was plenty of Jamie's ship to hit.

The shuddering blows were like thunder punches, and with each one, Jamie worried that some vital part of the ship would be hit and they would go down. There was nothing more chilling to a sailor than the thought of being swallowed by the sea. It could be a great ally at times, but in other instances, it only promised death. Jamie had dodged that fate for a number of years now. There were many times when he knew he was lucky to still be alive; the scars on his body were a testament to that. There had always been one driving force to him, though, something that propelled him through life and protected him from dying by any other means.

Years ago, he had made a promise to avenge his parents. Up until today, that promise had been left unfulfilled. He had always been meant to make it to this day; his and Antoine Buchelle's destinies were linked. He grit his teeth and hoped that he wouldn't suffer the same fate as his parents, but sometimes life could be cruel that way, and at least then Hollie would be able to forget about him. He could die happy as well, knowing that he had experienced a kiss with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He hoped that she would find a way back to the Highlands, though. It didn't seem fair that she should be condemned to a life with Jacques when her heart was so pure, so filled with a need to love.

The boat shook again, and he shot out a hand to steady himself.

"Keep firing back!" he cried as he took the wheel and tried to guide the ship away, turning it so that he offered a narrower angle to the enemy. The boat lumbered around, taking far too much time than they had. When Jamie looked down at the deck, he saw the smoke

rising and the dead bodies strewn across the deck. There were pitted holes as well and parts of the barricades that had been blown apart and splintered by cannonballs. A few men had been thrust overboard and were struggling to get to the ropes that would allow them to climb back to the ship.

Jamie glanced back and cursed again.

“Get me that damned sail! We need the wind!” he said, hoping that the gale would be kind to him today and allow him to put some distance between him and Buchelle’s ship. He expected to see his men around the sail, trying to unfurl it, but instead, when he looked back, he saw Hollie and Lily. For a moment, he almost called them away and ordered them to get back below decks where it was safe, but in truth, he knew there were no safe parts of the boat any longer. He needed all their help, and he was grateful that Hollie was still willing to help him after all he had put her through.

The sails unfolded like a great pair of wings, and it was a glorious sight to behold. Jamie spun the wheel and gave his men the order to row as fast as they could. Cannonballs were still being fired from behind them, but now that they had turned, there was less of a chance for them to hit. Jamie knew he couldn’t outrun them forever, but the large sail caught a lot of the wind, and it propelled them away. On this day, the sea was being kind to them, and the wind was proving itself a valuable ally. Jamie took a moment to close his eyes and remember the last thing his mother had ever told him.

Although Jamie was ready to rejoice at the fact they had been able to put some distance between themselves and the enemy, he knew that any joy would be short-lived. They had to repair the ship quickly and find a place where they could form a counterattack. He had some plans in his mind, although they relied on some fortune. The sky was clear, and he wished that a mist would descend upon the sea that might have obscured them. Thankfully, though, it would only take a well-placed cannon shot to end the threat, and he hoped that he was able to get in the right position then he might well end the day as a victor, and also gain the revenge he sought above all else.

He leaped down from the helm and strode toward Hollie.

“I didnae expect tae see ye here,” he said.

“I was nae gaeing tae stay in the cabin. It’s lucky I was here in the end,” Hollie replied.

“Aye, and I’m glad for it, but we cannae rest now. We hae tae put distance between us and them,” he said, looking back to look at the enemy ship. It, too, had turned. Despite its small size, it was not as agile as the larger ship, for it was bogged down with the weight of many cannons. Still, it was turning, and it was in pursuit of Jamie. Their forward cannons took potshots, which landed harmlessly in the water behind, but it was still a warning that death was always just a moment away.

“Angus, I need ye tae get down there and make sure the men are rowing as hard as they can. I know we hae the wind at our sails, but I want tae make sure we are as swift as we can be. I’ll see tae the repairs. We’ll hae tae fix everything as we gae,” he said. He nodded to Hollie and told her to keep manning the sails.

There was so much more he wanted to say to her, but it wasn’t the

right time. Battle could often make emotions run high, and there was no need for him to fall into the trap that had proven to be the ruin of so many other men.

He left the women to the sail and went to help the gunners reload the cannons. He nodded to them all and made sure to give them encouraging words. Their hands were blackened with ash, and the mood was solemn as the deck was littered with the dead. No doubt there were plenty more within the ship as well. A toll would have to be taken when the battle was over, and then the proper respects could be paid. But for now, that would have to wait.



HOLLIE FELT proud for being able to help in battle. She was glad of the respite and thankful for Jamie's praise. The ship was a rugged thing as it limped along. She tried not to look back at the other ship as it only served to fill her with dread. She considered herself a part of the crew, even though the crew might have thought of her as a prisoner. If the ship was captured, she wasn't sure she would be shown mercy.

She took a moment to relax against the mast, pressing her head against the wood. She had no idea what Jamie's plan was or where they were sailing to. It seemed inevitable that the other ship would catch up with them eventually, so she assumed they would mount an attack. She did not know at all where and when this was going to take place, and it filled her with fear.

"We should probably help clean up the deck," Lily said in a small voice as she looked at the dead bodies on the deck. The blood was slick and dark, as though the shadow of life had left these men and now clung to the boards that made up the deck.

Hollie and Lily began to drag them to the sides of the boat, out of the way of people trying to make their way along the deck. It was a grisly thing, especially when she occasionally turned the men around and saw the gaping wounds where their guts spilled out of their bodies. Her face paled, but it was a testament to her vigor that she did not swoon or faint, unlike her betrothed, who had fallen at the first sight of blood.

Out of idle curiosity, Hollie glanced up to see what Jacques had

been doing. Although she was not a mean person, she did entertain the notion that he might have been hit by an errant cannonball. Unfortunately, that had not happened, and he was still there, and her mouth fell open as she realized that a few of them had broken free.

It only took a cursory glance to see what had happened. A cannonball had been shot against the deck and careened down, breaking through the top deck. It left a gaping hole and had weakened the structure that held the chains. With all the commotion going on elsewhere, Jacques's men had been able to break free and used their newfound freedom to free their companions. They were in the midst of freeing Jacques when Hollie raised the alarm, shouting as loudly as she could.

Angus was the first one to respond. He roared and charged into the fray, barreling into the men and sending them flying. They crashed around like stones, but they quickly regained their strength and swarmed over him like flies. Lily gasped in fear as she saw Angus being dragged to the deck, his great muscles disappearing underneath a mass of flesh. Jamie was by his companion's side in an instant, sword flashing as he cut through the enemy. He felled two, but then a third used a chain to block the deadly attack of the blade. Hollie saw the panic on Jamie's face as the blade became caught in the links of the chain. He struggled to free it, but it took too long. A few of Jacques's men were upon him and pulling him away. They punched him in the gut, and Hollie shrieked with fear as she realized that there were more of Jacques's men on the top deck than there were of Jamie's. Most of his were either rowing or repairing the ship below the top deck, not to mention the dead.

Hollie ran to pick up a dagger from one of the men who had died, but before she could, she was pulled away and thrown to the ground. She looked up and saw a grisly face staring back at her, with an unspoken threat that if she moved, she would be killed. Jamie and Angus were in the same position, and soon enough, so were the other allies.

Jacques was the last one to be freed and had a smug look on his face. He wrung his hands and massaged his wrists as he returned to his feet. He towered over the captured crew. Hollie hated the way he looked. His sneering smile was revolting, and she couldn't imagine that she had ever considered building a life with this man.

“Oh Captain, Captain, Captain,” Jacques said slowly. “What a predicament we find ourselves in. I’m sure you must have thought yourself quite the genius when you bested me and captured me, which was quite an underhanded thing to do, I must say. You should know better than to attack the Buchelles. Does my father’s reputation mean nothing to you?”

The question was rhetorical, so Jacques did not wait for an answer. Jamie growled in reply.

“In a way, I’m glad that you did this because for a long time now, I have been waiting for an opportunity to show my father that I can be as ruthless as him. Now I have the perfect victim.” As he said this, he kicked Jamie in the ribs. It made the captain double over, and Hollie winced in pain, almost sharing the sensation.

“As you know, I have been doing a lot of studying in my cabin, and I am eager to practice on a living person. I think it will be interesting to see how you respond when I try and stimulate pain. I’m sure that father will be interested as well.”

“Yer da doesnae care about ye, Jacques. If he did, he would hae paid the ransom. He’d rather take the chance that ye died in the crossfire than part with his gold. It’s more important than yer life. Cannae ye see that?”

Jacques’s face became flushed with anger. “You have no idea how much my father cares for me. He has opened doors and given me all kinds of opportunities. He is building an empire the likes of you cannot understand. You’re just some petty, small captain who got too greedy, and soon enough, you’re going to pay the price for your sin. I’ll be there watching, and it’s going to be the best day of my life. I’m going to make you watch your entire crew suffer before I take you for myself. The pain is going to be excruciating, and by the time I’m finished with you, you’ll be begging for me to give you the sweet release of death.” Jacques leaned in and whispered in Jamie’s face, “But I won’t.”

“Ye cannae make me hurt any more than I already hae been. Ye dinnae know what I hae been through,” Jamie said.

Hollie’s ears pricked up at this. She wondered if this was bluster by Jamie or if he was hinting at something that had happened in his past.

“Oh yes. All your scars...so manly, aren’t they?” Jacques scoffed, rising back to his feet and shaking his head. He paced away from

Jamie and came to stand before Hollie. "I'm sure that was one of the things that was so intriguing about you to this woman who would have been my wife. It's such a shame, Hollie. When we met, I thought you were a sweet thing, but over the course of the voyage, you have proven yourself to be nothing but a harlot. You threw yourself to him even when I was in my cabin, studying hard to become a doctor so that I could give you a respectable life. I'm sure you even freed yourself willingly, offering yourself to him instead of being in chains. You're nothing but a common whore," he spat, curling his lip with disdain as he looked down upon her.

Hatred festered in Hollie's heart as she stood there and took this abuse from him. Who was he to speak to her like this? He was the one who had failed to defend *her*, who had ignored *her*, who had threatened to lock *her* in a cabin because he was petty and jealous.

"It's a shame, really. I might have even been tempted to maintain our agreement for the sake of the deal my father made with yours. You're still young; you would have your entire life to make up these transgressions for me. But then you had to go and warn these people that I was being freed. Where is the loyalty, Hollie? I was supposed to be your husband. You were supposed to side with me in all things, yet you turn your back on me at the first sign of trouble? I cannot have that in a wife, oh no, so now your fate is going to be linked to these criminals. You wanted to help them so badly, well now you get to be a part of their crew. I hope that you've learnt a valuable lesson today."

"Aye, I've learnt that marrying ye would hae been the worst mistake of my life. I dinnae care if ye and yer da decide tae kill us all. I'd rather be dead than be married tae ye," Hollie spat, to impressed looks from Jamie's crew.

Jacques was not amused at all, though. He looked horrified that anyone should speak to him in this manner, especially in front of men he was trying to lead. Without any hesitation, he slapped Hollie on the face with the back of his hand. His knuckles stung, and the pain reverberated across her face. The impact caused her head to twist around. Strands of hair swept across her cheek, but she didn't care. If she was going to die, then she was going to die saying what was true in her heart, without being swayed by anyone else.

Jacques looked disappointed in her, not that she particularly cared. He rubbed the hand he had used to slap her and then ordered his men

to go and cut the sails. Hollie, Jamie, and the rest watched in horror as Jacques's men took swords to the mast and cut the ropes that held the swords down. Others stood guard by the entrance to the locked door of the lower decks, ensuring that there would be no unexpected surprises rising up from the bowels of the ship. As the ropes were cut, the sail fell, just as if they had cut the wings from a bird. It came down dramatically, as though the sky was falling from the heavens, and it draped across the wet deck. The naked mast stood aloft, but without a sail upon it, it was stripped of its power. The wind whipped around them, but with nothing to catch it, the boat was stranded.

Hollie held her head high, vowing to herself that if death were going to come to her, she would meet it with pride. She locked her gaze with Jamie and wondered if there was anything he wished he had said to her.

The ship came to a standstill. Even the oarsmen in the bowels of the boat seemed to know that something had changed. The water lapped against the hull, and there was nothing to do now except wait for their destiny. Jacques was strutting across the deck like a peacock, as though he had won the day himself thanks to his nous and acumen, when in reality, he hadn't played any part in it at all. Hollie was hoping there would be some last miracle to save them, that Jamie had one last trick up his sleeve, but it appeared that wasn't going to be the case. Behind them, the enemy ship drew closer. It was a slow crawl because of the weight of all the cannons, but the wind carried it forward, and soon enough, it was side by side with the prey.

Hollie swallowed a lump in her throat and tried to ignore the cold fear that trickled down her spine. She had never anticipated being embroiled in a war. Jamie looked sullen. His head was bowed, and his hands were clasped behind his back. He looked a shell of the man she had gotten used to. There was no brash confidence, no declaration of glory or last-chance heroics, merely a simple acceptance that a loss had been inevitable. Perhaps this was what he meant when he had said that nobody ever had much of a choice.

Grappling hooks were flung onto the boat, drawing the other boat closer. Planks were then adjoined between the two ships, and the enemy boarded. They circled the deck and the doors to the lower decks were opened. Hollie watched with dread as the oarsmen and other men were dragged from the depths of the ship and hauled up to sit with their shipmates as they awaited their fate. The atmosphere on the ship was a grim one. Everyone seemed to know what was going to happen, and nobody was able to stop it. Hollie caught a few people glancing toward their captain for inspiration, but he had none to offer.

The last person to arrive from the other ship was an older man. Just one glance at him was enough to know that he was Jacques's father. He was taller than Jacques, with the same oily black hair that was long and straight. He had a pencil mustache and a thin beard running down in a line on his chin. His lips were thin, his eyes were like a hawk's, and his clothes were expensive. He strode forward with his chest puffed out. As soon as he arrived, Jacques bowed with respect.

"Welcome to my latest quarry, Father," he said.

Antoine surveyed the crew and the damage done, nodding gently.

"It's almost as good as I'd have done myself," he said in a thick French accent. "When I got the message about your ransom, I feared the worst. I am glad to see you are well, my son. I trust that your wits saw you able to free yourself?"

"Indeed, Father, and now all we need to do is make them pay for what they have done."

"Good, good. Although I do have to tell you that you should never have let this happen in the first place. This was supposed to be an ordinary trip. You should not have let yourself be captured in the first place. I am very disappointed in you, Jacques."

"Yes, Father," Jacques bowed his head and had his arms locked in a straight position at his sides. Antoine spoke to Jacques with such little praise or care that it was almost enough to inspire pity in Hollie's heart...almost.

Antoine walked up to the crew and stood in front of Jamie. He looked down and regarded Jamie with a cold look.

"So this is the man who would dare try and extract a ransom from me? Do you not know who I am? You're either brave or a fool, or perhaps you're both. You aren't the first to try and take advantage of my wealth, and I doubt you'll be the last either. That's the problem with growing an empire; everyone always wants a piece of it. A shame, really; you seem the ruthless type, the kind I could have made use of."

"I would never work for ye," Jamie said.

The response seemed to take Antoine by surprise. He arched an eyebrow and got on his haunches, studying Jamie carefully. He took Jamie's chin in his hands and tilted his face from side to side, examining every inch of it.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“We hae never met,” Jamie replied.

Antoine still looked puzzled, but he thought no more of it as he rose back to his full height and surveyed the crew. Jacques stood by his father’s side, wringing his hands together like the sniveling little coward he was.

“I already told them what we’re going to do with them, Father. I want the captain for myself. He’s caused me no end of trouble, and I want to make him suffer. I’ve been studying hard, just like you told me to, and I think I can make his screams be heard all the way through England and Spain.”

Antoine laughed and patted his son on the shoulder. “There will be time for all that, but never forget that the only reason to do anything is because of money. Think of what you’ll get out of it. If there is no profit, then do not waste your time. It’s easier to kill him than to keep him alive for a long time.”

Jacques looked disappointed at this, but he did not seek to dispute his father’s words.

“Now, what do we have here?” Antoine said as he looked upon the crew. “There will be some of you who will die along with your captain. That is a price you have to pay for being loyal, and I’m sure it’s one that you knew was likely to happen. But I am always on the lookout for strong, prosperous men to join my fleet. I’m sure some of you will be worthy enough. I’ll have to see which of you I will give a second chance to,” he said, letting his gaze linger across the men.

Hollie wondered how many of the men would take a deal that was offered, especially if their lives were on the line. Were their lives worth more than their principles? What was her life worth?

“You might find this one interesting,” Jacques said. “This is the woman I was supposed to marry.” He didn’t bother to try and hide the disdain from his voice. He looked down his nose and Hollie and sneered, as though everything about her was distasteful. “She has flaunted her duties to me and instead spent more time with the captain than myself. She is not the virtuous, well-behaved girl we thought. I believe the rumors of Highlanders still clinging to their savage ways is accurate. She is not who we believed her to be,” he said.

Hollie couldn’t stop herself from fighting back against his words.

She wasn't about to let her reputation be besmirched while she was sitting right there. "Ye hae no idea what ye are talking about! *He* was the one who locked himself in a room and ignored me. *He* was the one who didnae help me when I was wounded. *He* was the one who hit me!" she cried.

Jacques looked horrified as the truth was revealed, and he started to splutter before his father, trying to convince him that she was lying. Antoine held up his hand to silence his son while he did not take his gaze off Hollie. She found herself intimidated by the man. Unlike his son, there was not any sense that Antoine had to prove anything to anyone. He was in control, with the power of life or death in his hands.

"You would do well to remember your place. You shouldn't interrupt me when I'm speaking. I would have thought a lady should know that. Perhaps my son is right, and the Highlanders aren't ready to enter the civilized world yet," he said.

Hollie kept her mouth tightly shut, despite every instinct telling her to do otherwise. Antoine didn't have anything else to say to her, though, and he turned back instead to his son.

"As for you, Jacques, I'm disappointed to hear that this is the way you have behaved. You should have used this voyage as the opportunity to experience the world. And you should never treat a lady like this. Men are for striking. Ladies, well, they require a different kind of touch altogether," Antoine said, and as he did so, an uncomfortable shudder passed through Hollie. Jacques bowed his head and nodded, mumbling something in reply that Hollie couldn't quite pick up on. "But you will have time enough to learn that. You are still to be married."

"Nay!" Hollie cried, while Jacques looked dumbstruck.

Hollie's glance ran toward Jamie. Her mouth dropped open, and he looked stunned too. She had assumed that at the very worst, she would have been killed, and at the best, she would have been shipped off to Scotland. Being married to Jacques was a fate worse than death, and she thought it cruel of Antoine to make her suffer so much.

Antoine turned to face her and frowned. "I would have thought you would be proud to marry into such an esteemed family. I can offer you wealth that you could not comprehend," he said.

"I...I hae no affection for yer son," Hollie admitted, fearing that he

would strike her, but no blow came. Instead, Antoine threw his head back in a bellowing laugh. He wiped a tear from his eye.

“Well, I admit Jacques is difficult to love, but there’s more to marriage than love, my dear. I can see that you have a lot to learn.”

“But Father, this...surely there must be someone else? She has rebuked me at every turn and has made it clear that she would rather spend time with this scoundrel than a man of refined upbringing. What good could possibly come of a marriage to her? There must be another prospect? She has been ruined by this man. She is little more than a common whore—”

Jacques was silenced by a swift slap from Antoine’s hand. The clap that came as skin met skin was as loud as thunder, and Hollie winced. A crimson mark lingered on Jacques’s cheek.

“You have many lessons to learn as well. You should never talk to your wife that way, at least not in the company of others. How long have I been trying to teach you that reputation is everything? And have you not learned to do as I say yet? I have never steered you wrong, Jacques, so do not presume to pretend that you know better than me. This woman is going to be your wife. That is the agreement, and that is what’s going to happen. If anyone should dare try and insult her reputation, they will have me to answer to, and that includes you as well.”

Hollie’s heart sank as she heard the determination in his voice. Once again, another man was making a decision for her, and she simply had to go along with it. At least that’s what she had been taught, but she had already made Jacques cool his interest in her. Perhaps she could do the same with Antoine. If she was enough of a nuisance then he might see that she was more trouble than she was worth.

“The feeling is mutual, Monsieur Buchelle. I dinnae want tae be married tae yer son. Is there no other woman in all of France who could be a better match for him?”

“Nobody who would serve my interest as well as you could,” he said, seemingly amused by her insistence on speaking her mind.

“I’m sure ye would want someone more suitable than a savage Highland girl. As Jacques said, I hae little in the way of manners, and I would hate for this tae be a reflection on yer good name. I dinnae feel as though I’m worthy of being a Buchelle. Perhaps it would be

best if ye sent me back tae the Highlands and found someone nobler. I'm sure Da would find some way tae compensate ye."

A strange look came upon Antoine's face. A flicker of a smile tugged at his lips. "I'm afraid that won't be possible, my dear. Your father is as good as dead, and your house is ruined."

Jamie had been kneeling in defeat, his mind turning to try and figure out how he was going to get out of this situation and gain his revenge. He had been all ready to face the ultimate fate without regret because he had always known his life would end in only one way, and if he was killed by Antoine, then at least his despair would be over. The sound of the man's voice was grating. He longed to have a weapon in his hand, but that was not possible. It was humbling to see himself so roundly defeated, but then again, the odds had always been against him.

Yet when he heard the news and saw the pain on Hollie's face, he relived his own pain over again. Hollie's face shifted from defiance to horror. She shook her head and denied it over and over again, unable to comprehend the reality that her father had been killed. She accused Antoine of lying, but Jamie knew Antoine wouldn't have lied about this. He was a sadistic man, and he would have reveled in the news, for all he wanted was to break people. Hollie was innocent in all of this. She should never have been harmed, and her family should have been spared the sorrow and the ignominy of being shattered by Antoine's cruelty. Tears began to trickle down Hollie's face, and she looked like a ghost.

"But I have good news. As the eldest, you have inherited the estate, and once you marry my son, it will be in good hands," Antoine added, a slimy smile creeping across his face.

"Ye murderer," Jamie growled, lifting his head to glare at Antoine as the anger swelled inside him. "Ye like tae think of yerself as a great visionary, but ye are nothing more than a common villain. Ye toy with lives and think ye hae the power tae take them whenever ye want. Ye will pay for this. I promise ye that ye will pay. I will rise up from hell

if I need tae and bring all the fire with me, and I'll see ye burn."

Venom dripped from Jamie's words, but Antoine didn't seem perturbed at all. The man must have thought he was invincible.

"And why is a petty thief like you getting worked up about this? I shouldn't think some man's life would matter much to you. I was under the impression you were colder than that. I thought we were one and the same, only I'm better than you."

"We are nothing alike, ye and I. Ye dinnae remember me, dae ye? I was just a child when ye haed dealings with my parents. They owed ye money because ye suddenly changed the deadline. Ye would nae give them a chance tae pay it. Ye sent men around tae kill them, but they left me alive. I haed tae watch my parents die because of ye, and since that day, I've been learning all about ye, Antoine. I've hunted ye and stalked ye, and I promise ye that I will see ye dead."

Antoine's eyes went cold as he studied Jamie. "That is a promise you will not be able to fulfill. It will have to wait for another life. The truth is, I don't even remember your parents. They were nothing to me. *You* are nothing to me, and neither are your threats. Do you truly think a man like you can possibly scare me? I have an empire, while all you have is some petty need for revenge. It's pathetic. You've wasted your life. But everyone will learn the lesson never to get in debt with Antoine Buchelle."

Jamie trembled with anger as Antoine treated him with such disdain. This wasn't the way it was supposed to have gone. He was supposed to have fought Antoine and killed him, especially when he had wounded Hollie so badly. Antoine was an abscess on the world, and it was a source of great shame that Jamie would be unable to fulfill the mission of his life. He bowed his head and thought about that defining moment when he had been nothing more than a boy when the strange men had come to his door and killed his parent in an instant.

At the time, it had been a mystery to him, but over the years, he had pieced together what had happened. His father had needed a loan, so he went to a merchant who seemed reputable, but after the deal was made, this merchant, Antoine Buchelle, altered the terms of the deal. That night, Jamie's father had learned that men were searching for him. He hoped to be able to flee the city and earn more money swiftly to pay off his debt, but Buchelle's men had found him

before that could happen. Jamie had already tracked down the men who had done the deed, but they had only been carrying out Antoine's orders. He was the head of the snake, and Jamie searched his mind to try and find a way to escape. His eyes darted around to his men, but they were all surrounded by the enemy. Even Angus looked desolate. He tested the chains, but they were sturdy. When he looked at Hollie, he wished that he could go over to her and comfort her or that he could say something to soothe her emotional turmoil. It wasn't enough, though. It was never enough, and the terrible thing was that, in this moment, he realized his life had been worthless.

He had devoted himself to one single cause since he was a boy. Now he was a man of 31 years of age, and what had he accomplished? Nothing. He was still that same scared boy who stood over his parents, wondering what he was going to do next. Every moment that was in between this and that meant nothing because he had proven to be a failure. Not only had he let his parents down, but he had let Hollie down as well, and now he was filled with nothing but regret.

If only he had told her what feelings truly lurked in his heart. If only he hadn't let their single kiss be the only intimate thing that passed between them...perhaps then he would not feel as sore about dying.

He almost wished that Antoine would get it over with and slit his throat there and then before tossing his body off the side of the ship. At least he would get off easy. For Hollie, her punishment was just beginning, and he longed to make it easier for her, but he knew he would not be able to. She would have to endure a life with Jacques, being used as a pawn for Antoine to take a hold of a Highland estate and plant his foot in the business there, spreading out his empire to blanket the four corners of the world.

Jamie hoped in a way that she would die too. At least then she would be spared all the pain. He winced as he thought about her being taken back to France and forced to have children with Jacques, to be paraded around with a feigned smile on her face, always with the threat of being punished if she ever stepped out of line, and he imagined that Jacques would be quick with his punishments.

And Antoine's empire would grow. His business interests would soar, and the coin in his bank would swell. It was a mad world where a man like him could prosper while good men were trampled by him.

But Antoine would make other enemies. Jamie had no doubt that there were others out there who had sworn revenge, and he only hoped that one of them would be able to succeed where he had failed. It was a strange feeling to come to terms with his defeat. It was surreal, and it hadn't quite sunk in yet, as though he was still hoping for some miracle that would shift the circumstances back to his favor. But he had no more allies. Antoine had a figurative boot on his neck, and now all Jamie could do was wait for the final moment where Antoine would send him for a reunion with his parents.

It was scant solace that he would see them again. Being with Hollie had opened his eyes to what another life could be like. He supposed it was a good thing to have been able to experience it for himself for a brief moment, but the taste had been bittersweet.

He looked longingly at Hollie, but she was staring into space, her eyes liquid with tears. Jamie swore vengeance on Antoine yet again, even though he knew that this time, there was no chance that it would come to pass.

His last thought was of his sister. He didn't think of her much at all, and over the years, he had gone long stretches without her being on his mind. But occasionally, he wondered where their father had taken her and if she had truly been safe. He liked to believe that she had and that she had grown up leading a pleasant life that was devoid of drama and pain. She had barely turned one when they had been separated, so it was doubtful that she remembered anything of that time. Perhaps it was for the best, he thought, for there were many things that he would rather have forgotten.

Hollie felt as though she had been punched in the gut. The world spun and became blurry as tears filled her eyes. She thought back to the beginning of this endeavor and how happy she had been to be married—and to a French gentleman no less! It had seemed like a dream, but that dream had swiftly turned into a nightmare. Now her father had died at the hands of this man, and what of her sisters? Sorrow trembled through her, but at the core of her, there was something else, something molten and raging. It surged within her, blazing vibrantly, and it gave her strength.

She kept her head bowed as she heard Jamie speak, almost gasping at the revelation he gave. Now it all made sense, the brooding and the mystery and the pain she sensed within him. He had lost everything from a young age. No wonder why he found it so difficult to open up to her. She glanced at him and wished that she would have told him the truth. Then again, there were so many things that she could wish for.

The farewell to her family had been painful, but she had never imagined it would be the final one. She always thought she would return there one day and share stories of her joys in France, but what joys would await her? She would be shackled to a man she did not love, and the only man she imagined she could love would soon be killed by Antoine.

Jamie had saved her more than once, and now she felt as though it was time to repay the favor. While she was crying, she was thinking. No doubt Antoine and Jacques thought her a weak, emotional woman who would never be able to turn against them or outwit them, and she wanted to use that to her advantage. She thought and thought about what she might do. It was difficult to imagine doing anything without

a weapon at hand, but then again, she had never been a warrior. What she needed was a distraction so that Jamie's men might rise up and fight back against the enemy. While Antoine was aboard, there was no chance that his ship would fire on them, and it might be possible to turn everything around. But how?

She looked at the men in turn. Weeping had not elicited any mercy from them, and she assumed there was nothing she could do to get their attention. Jacques clearly had no affection left in his heart for her—that was, if there had ever been any in the first place. She noticed that he was keeping his gaze aloft, refusing to look at the dead bodies and the shades of blood on the deck.

Suddenly an idea flashed in her mind. She turned to Lily and began nudging her, whispering low that she needed to try and get to her hair clip. Under the pretense of comforting Hollie, Lily nuzzled into her and freed the hair clip from Hollie's tresses. It fell and landed in Hollie's palm.

Hollie had to prevent herself from showing a triumphant smile. Instead, she gripped the hair clip tightly and moved the pin so that it stood straight. She angled it so that it pricked against her wrist. She gasped and winced as she endured the pain and felt the warm bloom of blood flowing out of her veins. It was not a deep cut, but it was enough to let blood pour. She cried out and then shifted her position so that she could show everyone her blood, including Jacques.

Since he wasn't expecting it, Jacques had no way of defending himself against the sudden onslaught of blood. It seemed as though without being furious, he was once again vulnerable to the sight of crimson life. Antoine barked an order to save her because she was important for the fortune, but his son was already fainting, and within a moment, he had collapsed to the deck. Antoine didn't realize until a couple of moments later, but when he turned and saw that his son had fallen, he rolled his eyes and then fell to his knees, trying to shake his son awake.

"Get over here!" he yelled to his men, and they left the prisoners to attend to Jacques.

Hollie glanced across at Jamie and Angus and nodded as Antoine's men tried to tend to her wound. She wasn't making it easy for them.

Jamie and Angus did not need any further notice. They roared as they rose up, and the rest of the men followed suit. What followed was

a mass of chaos. Antoine's men were struck back and pulled down. Now, with the number of men having been reinforced by the ones who had been brought up from the lower decks, Jamie's crew was able to put up a better fight. The distraction helped as well. They were able to use the element of surprise to their advantage, and soon enough, the situation had been reversed. Now it was Antoine's men who were in chains while Jamie stood over them.

Jacques groaned as he regained consciousness. He was still faint, and he moaned softly as he found himself being manhandled by Jamie's crew.

"Get off me!" he cried.

"Be quiet!" Antoine thundered. The French merchant's face was as dark as a storm, and he glowered as chains were clasped around his wrists. "If you weren't so weak, we wouldn't be in this situation. You have too much of your mother in you. I'm starting to wonder if you're actually my son at all."

Jacques didn't say anything in reply.

Antoine looked up at Jamie. Hollie was now free of her own chains, and Lily was tending to her wound, wrapping some fabric around the small cut. Hollie took the hair clip triumphantly and whispered a brief thank you to her parents, for without them, she would not have been able to cause the distraction.

"You won't get away with this, you cur," Antoine said.

"I think I already have," Jamie replied. He walked over to Hollie to check on her. His touch was tender, and there was kindness in his eyes.

"Jamie, is what ye said true? Did he really dae that tae yer family?"

Jamie nodded. He was finally able to release the pain that had lurked within him. Finally, he could be honest with her.

"Why didnae ye tell me?" she asked.

"It was my pain tae bear, nae yers," he said.

Hollie peered at him and might well have slapped him under different circumstances. She believed they had been through too much together to keep secrets from each other.

"And I'm sorry that ye haed tae gae through more pain," Jamie added. "I'm sorry that all this happened tae ye. I never wanted ye tae suffer like this. I never wanted ye tae know what it's like tae feel the

cruelty of that man.”

“Aye, well, it’s happened now, and there’s nothing I can dae about it. All I want is tae see him punished,” Hollie said. She looked past Jamie and directed her words to Antoine. “And I’m nae gaeing tae marry Jacques. I will spend whatever years I hae left making sure that nobody in the Highlands does business with ye.”

“That will nae be a problem,” Jamie said.

Angus walked up to him and handed over Jamie’s sword. It was long and broad, with a sharp point at the end. Jamie walked up to Antoine, towering over him. With his black trousers and tunic, he looked like a vision of death itself.

“I hae been waiting all my life for this, Antoine. Ye killed my parents. I hae no idea how many other people ye hae hurt over the years, but this is for all of them. I can imagine that there will be much rejoicing after yer death. When ye are gone, people will remember ye as a villain. Yer empire will crumble; I’ll see tae that. I’ll see tae it that everything ye worked for turns tae ash,” Jamie said. He drew back the sword.

Hollie gasped, but she could not avert her eyes. There was something savage about this punishment.

“Shouldnae we take him tae the proper authorities?” Lily cried out.

Jamie’s hand didn’t waver from his sword, nor did his gaze waver from the villain kneeling before him. “He would only buy his way tae freedom. There’s only one punishment fitting for a man like him.”

Hollie was inclined to agree. After all Antoine had put them through, she couldn’t see that he deserved anything else. There was no telling how many times during his life he had slipped through justice, and there would be no escape this time.

“Wait!” Antoine cried out as Jamie was ready to swing his sword through the air and make it sing with the blood of his avowed enemy.

“What are yer last words?” Jamie asked.

There was desperation in Antoine’s eyes rather than determination. “I lied before! The girl’s father is not dead,” he said.

Hollie gasped, and Jamie looked around to stare at her.

“I lied. I lied! I only did it because I wanted to wound her. I sent another ship to fetch him. I was going to bring him to France and force him to alter the terms of our deal to be more favorable. I was going to threaten him with her well-being.” He glanced at Hollie as he

said this. "If you spare me, I can tell you where I was going to meet the pirates, and you can have him back. I'll give you the location, and you let me go back to my ship. I'll sail away, you have my word on that."

"Yer word means nothing. This is just a trick," Jamie said, and threatened Antoine with the edge of the blade again.

"I promise I'm telling you the truth! The girl's father is alive! But the only way you'll find him is if you let me go. If I don't arrive, the pirates are under orders to kill him."

Jamie stared at him for a long while. Then he turned and walked back toward Hollie.

"I'm gaeing tae be honest with ye, Hollie. There's nothing I want more than tae kill this man after everything he's done, but if there's a chance that yer da is alive, then I need tae know what ye want tae dae. Dae ye believe him, or should we kill him now?"

It was a terrible choice. Hollie looked at Antoine and wasn't sure if she believed him or not. It was so easy to delude herself with the hope that she couldn't trust her own instincts, and yet she wasn't sure she could live with the fact that she had the chance to save her father. If he ended up dead because of her, then she would be the worst daughter in the world. She felt awful because she knew how much this revenge meant to Jamie, and once again, Antoine would end up escaping justice.

But it was her father...

"I think...I think if there's a chance that my da is still alive, I hae tae take it," she said, her voice trembling.

Jamie clenched his jaw and nodded. Even though it had been her choice, she still wondered if he was going to turn around and kill the man. He would have been well within his rights, after all. But Jamie sheathed his sword.

"Give me the location, but I will take yer ship. Ye can hae this one," he said, glancing around at the ship with the cut sails, the pitted holes in the top deck, and the boards stained with blood. "It will take ye a while tae repair her, enough time tae know that ye will nae chase us. But if I find that ye are lying, I will come back, and I'll hae yer head," he hissed.

Then he spun away, leading his men across the boarding planks to the other ship, along with as many supplies and belongings that they

could take. To aid the speed of the ship, he ordered his men to push away a number of cannons. They dropped into the water and sank below the surface. He wasn't about to leave himself defenseless, but he did not want his ship to be one of war, and he knew that time was of the essence. Hollie wasn't sure how she would ever be able to thank him for what he did.

Once they had settled on the boat and were sailing toward the location that Antoine had given them, Hollie approached Jamie.

"How is yer arm?" Jamie asked.

"It's better," she said, looking down at the fabric that was tied around her wrist.

"That was some quick thinking. I'm impressed," he said.

"Thank ye. I'm just glad I was able tae help, although I'm sorry that ye were nae able tae get yer revenge."

Jamie sighed. "If there's a chance that yer da is alive, then we hae tae take it. I would rather ye be reunited with yer da than kill Antoine. But I'm still nae sure I can trust the word of that man."

Hollie remained silent for a moment. "Jamie," she began in a soft voice, "ye know that after all we've been through taegether, ye can talk tae me about...well...about anything, really. Even about yer parents, about what happened."

She looked up at him and saw his eyes glisten with sorrow, as though they were reflecting the sea itself.

"There's nothing tae tell," he said. "It happened a long time ago. It was another life. They died, and they're nae coming back."

They sailed to a barren part of the coast where the rendezvous was supposed to have taken place. Jamie and Hollie waited for a long time for another ship to arrive, but there was nothing on the horizon. Jamie scanned the sea with the spyglass and cursed under his breath.

“They’re nae coming,” Jamie muttered.

Hollie felt despondent and worried for her father.

“Does this mean...does this mean he’s dead?” Hollie asked.

“I dinnae know. With a man like Antoine, ye can never be sure. I’m sorry, lass, but it looks as though he tricked us.” Jamie was barely able to hide the naked fury in his voice. He slammed his hands against the side of the ship and then snarled. “If we leave now, we might be able tae catch him before he reaches land. They hae a lot of repairs. The wind is fair...we could reach him and blow him tae kingdom come. I’ll make him pay for this trickery. I’ll make him pay for everything he’s done. I cannae believe I’ll let him get away. I cannae believe that he’s gaeing tae gae back tae his life and keep on hurting people. It’s nae fair. It’s nae right!” he said, and he started to order the men to man their stations and prepare to return to where they had left Antoine and the broken ship.

But Hollie was there to interrupt his train of thought. “Jamie,” she said softly, “ye dinnae hae tae gae back. There’s nothing calling ye there. We hae a chance tae be free, tae gae home.”

“This is my home,” Jamie said bitterly.

“Aye, but it’s nae mine,” Hollie said. “If ye chase him now, ye are always gaeing tae be chasing him, and where is it gaeing tae lead? Are ye gaeing tae chase him for the rest of yer life?”

“If that’s what it takes,” Jamie said.

Hollie felt her heart sink. After all this time, she thought that he

had finally started to see more than revenge, but it seemed he was still blinded.

She turned her back to him. “If that’s what ye truly want, Jamie, then ye should gae. But please, grant me passage home first. I hoped that ye would be able tae see some other path, but if this is what ye want from yer life, then I cannae stop ye.”

Hollie believed that Jamie loved her, but once again, she was doubting her feelings. Every time they seemed to become close to each other, there was something that tore them apart, and she wondered if Jamie would ever be able to prevent his revenge from overriding every other desire in his body. She longed to fling herself at him again, to embrace him and kiss him and show him that there were other things in life, but the man was stubborn. He couldn’t see anything other than Antoine. His life was out here, at sea, and she was finally beginning to accept that he didn’t have any room for love in his life.

She could feel him staring at her.

“I’ll take ye back tae the Highlands,” he said, but that was all he promised. Hollie returned to her cabin and wept.



“YE KNOW SHE’S RIGHT,” Angus said as he joined Jamie after Hollie had vacated the upper area of the deck. “If ye keep gaeing the way ye are, then ye are never gaeing tae be happy. By the time ye get back, Antoine will be back in France, and he’ll employ dozens of men tae make sure ye never get close tae him. It’s gaeing tae be a miracle tae even find him again. It’ll be the work of a lifetime.”

“And if it takes a lifetime tae fulfill the vow I made when I was a child, then it will take a lifetime,” Jamie said.

“Would they want ye tae dae this?” Angus asked. The wind whispered around them, and the water lapped against the hull of the boat as they began their journey back to the Highlands. The light was fading, and it gave the world an eerie, mystical feel. “Would they nae want ye tae be happy? I’ve seen the way she looks at ye and the way ye look at her. This could be a chance for ye tae settle down.”

“Settling down is nae an option for people like us,” Jamie said dryly. “And the point is that my parents are nae here tae tell me what

they would like. They were taken from me, and I cannae live knowing that the man responsible is out there prospering. I hae tae get my revenge. It's the only thing I hae left."

"If that's true, then I feel sorry for ye, my friend. There's more tae the world than revenge. Ye came face-tae-face with him, and it was clear that he didnae care about ye. He barely even remembered yer parents. What good is it gaeing tae dae tae kill him? What happens after that? At some point, ye are gaeing tae need a life for yerself, and the sooner it begins, the better."

"That's a luxury I cannae afford. I've been wanting this since I was a child. I cannae just give up now, nae when I'm sae close! As soon as we've taken Hollie back home, we'll circle back and gather more men. We'll dae whatever we can tae get information on Antoine. I doubt his ego will allow him tae remain hidden for long."

When Angus spoke next, his words were heavy and solemn. "It's a journey that ye'll hae tae make without me," he said.

Jamie twisted his head and glared at his friend. "What are ye talking about it?"

"I've decided that I'm gaeing tae stay in the Highlands with Lily. We've been spending a lot of time taegether, and I've fallen in love. I was nae sure it would ever happen, and I know that there's no better woman who is gaeing tae fall in love with me. I cannae pass up this opportunity. I dinnae want tae spend my whole life at sea."

Jamie felt his heart tremble. "Then gae. I will find someone tae replace ye," he said sharply.

He turned his back to Angus, who had nothing further to say. Jamie was once again left alone to gaze out at the sky as the sun made its final descent and relinquished the celestial throne to the moon. He stared at the stars with much on his mind, wondering how it could be so easy for Angus to surrender the life they had. He thought about Hollie as well and how she had implored him to find another way to live. If he were a different man, then maybe he could have torn himself from his destiny, but his path had been set so many years ago now, and his task was still unfulfilled.

If Antoine was still out there, then he could not rest. Revenge was all he had left. He had known it for so long, it was like a constant companion, following him like a shadow. Happiness was a foreign concept to him, and he only wished that he was a better man so that

Hollie's heart wasn't wasted on a wretch like him.



THE JOURNEY to the Highlands passed without any events. The wind was fair, and the mood on the ship was one of joy since they had managed to squirm out of Antoine's grasp. Jamie was about the only one who wasn't smiling. He barely saw Hollie, who was keeping to herself, and even Angus was keeping his distance. He thought he was doing the right thing, but doubt niggled at the back of his mind.

They sailed into port, and Jamie breathed in the air of home, of where he had been born. There was always a pang in his heart when he returned, which is why he didn't make a habit of returning here. There were too many bad memories for him.

He summoned a carriage for Hollie, who claimed that she could make it back home of her own accord from here on out, but Jamie insisted that he wanted to see her to her door just in case Antoine had any agents working in this place. It was a flimsy excuse for wanting to spend more time with her, for he was filled with the sudden realization that soon she would not be in his life any longer. He had chosen her over revenge when Antoine had given Jamie the choice of his head or information about Hollie's father, so why was he so determined to choose revenge now?

The mood was somber as the carriage carried them across the land toward the Montgomery estate. After so much time at sea with nothing on the horizon but wispy clouds, it was strange to see a world bursting with life. There was something new to see in every direction, some new flash of color or a bird soaring through the sky. It reminded him how barren and lonely life could sometimes be.

The carriage arrived, and Hollie flung the door open, running out, shouting at the top of her lungs for her father and sisters. The main doors of the house opened too, and her family emerged. When Hollie saw her father, she flung her arms around him and wept fretfully. Her sisters were there as well, and they seemed confused as to why she had returned and why she was in such a state. It was a happy reunion, and Jamie was a little envious that she got to experience it. As far as he was concerned, it was just another sign that he did not belong here, that he did not deserve to be a part of this world.

By the time he and the others joined them, Hollie had almost finished the frantic tale of how they had escaped Antoine's grip and how she had been so afraid that she would return to find her father dead.

"I'm alive and well, my dear, and I plan tae stay that way for a long time." Allan grinned, although the smile quickly fell from his face as he was troubled by what he heard. "I will hae tae warn my friends about Antoine, though. I'll see tae it that he doesnae make inroads intae the Highlands." Then he caught sight of Jamie, Angus, and Lily. He lit up when he saw Jamie. "And ye must be the man who saved my daughter! I owe ye a great debt," he said.

"I would nae bother. He's only interested in one thing," Hollie snapped.

Her father nor her sisters failed to notice the emotion in her voice. Her sisters whispered to each other and giggled. Their gaze shifted between Hollie and Jamie, no doubt wondering what had transpired between them. Jamie wasn't about to give them fuel for their gossip, though. It was clear that Hollie wanted nothing else to do with them, and he could not blame her for that.

"Thank ye for yer offer, but seeing Hollie safe is reward enough. During the voyage, I received a new ship tae, and I'm sure that I can use it tae make my future a prosperous one," Jamie said.

As he spoke, Allan stared at him for a long while, so much so that it started to make Jamie feel uncomfortable. He was used to people staring at him because of his scar, but this felt like something more. Allan stepped away from his daughter and closed the distance between him and Jamie, tilting his head to the side. Hollie was standing with her sisters while Angus and Lily were together.

"I know ye," Allan whispered.

"I hae never met ye before," Jamie said. He worried because during his life he had done some dishonorable things, and it wouldn't have surprised him to learn that a poster calling for a bounty had found its way to Scotland.

"Ye look like...nay, it cannae be. What is yer last name, Jamie?"

"Baxter," Jamie replied.

Allan's eyes went wide as realization crept upon his face. He staggered back, as though a phantom had appeared before his eyes. He reached out to Jamie and gripped the man tightly around the

shoulders. Tears filled his eyes, and he smiled widely; the look was so bright that it was as though dawn was breaking upon his face.

“Jamie,” he breathed. “Jamie, I looked sae hard for ye. I could nae find ye,” he began.

“What dae ye mean? Why were ye looking for me?” Jamie furrowed his brow, and the others had fallen silent as well, for everyone was puzzled by Allan’s words. Jamie was beginning to get paranoid that he was being hunted for a bounty, but the look on Allan’s face wasn’t anything malicious or vindictive. In fact, it was as though a great burden had been lifted from him.

“I knew yer parents,” he said. “Yer da came tae me and told me that he was in trouble. I went tae the house and found them. It was a terrible sight,” he said, his face turning ashen as he traveled back to that night in his mind. “I looked everywhere for ye, but ye were nae there. I went tae every tavern I knew tae see if anyone had seen ye wandering around, but I lost ye tae the streets. I’m sorry, lad. I promised yer da that if anything would happen, I would keep ye safe. I couldnae keep that promise. But there is someone I think ye should meet,” Allan said, his gaze drifting toward Lily.

Jamie listened to the words, but he could hardly believe them. All his life, he thought he was alone. He had never imagined that anyone would think to look for him. All this time, he could have been a part of a family if he hadn’t fled his home after his parents had died.

Allan wasn’t finished. “Jamie, dae ye remember yer wee sister? Yer da brought her tae me tae keep safe.”

Jamie turned to face Lily. When they had first met on the boat, there had been a flicker of recognition, but Jamie had dismissed it as wishful thinking. He thought it impossible that he should cross paths with his sister again. But now to realize that she had been on the same ship as him all this time, that they had been in such close proximity... it left him reeling. He turned to his sister. His heart trembled, and his stomach swam with all kinds of unfamiliar feelings. Lily had a stunned look on her face as well.

“What are ye saying?” she asked.

“Ye would nae remember. Ye were sae young,” Allan said. “I raised ye in the household. I’m sorry I never told ye that ye hae a brother. When I could nae find him, I thought the worst, and I thought ye’d haed enough sorrow in yer life and didnae need anymore. But what a

miracle this is! Jamie, ye hae brought my daughter back tae me, and now ye hae been reunited with yer own family.”

Jamie stood there, unsure of what to say or how to feel. He had long given up any hope of seeing his sister again. He realized that by listening to his heart and bringing Hollie back home, he had been reunited with his sister. If he had followed his lust for revenge, then he wouldn't have known. He would have continued going through life believing that he was truly alone.

He turned to face Lily. They both had dumbfounded looks on their faces. Now that he knew the truth, he could see the family resemblance. Because the possibility of them being related had been so remote before, he hadn't even entertained the possibility, but now he saw how much she looked like their mother. He smiled, and his wretched heart started to heal itself. Lily held out her hand. Jamie took it. Their fingers met, and he felt connected again.

“I...I think I should like tae stay a while tae get tae know my sister,” he said quietly.

“Of course,” Allan said. “Ye can stay as long as ye want.”

Hollie's homecoming had not gone as she imagined. Her ire toward Jamie had softened when her father had revealed that Lily was Jamie's long-lost sister. It was surprising to think that her and Jamie's lives had in some way been entwined for a long time. The look on his face when he found out that his sister was standing before him was heartwarming, and she couldn't help but feel happy for him despite the enmity that existed before them. Hollie knew exactly what Anna and Charlotte were thinking, and she wasn't looking forward to telling them all that had happened. First of all, she needed to speak to Jamie because there was still so much in her heart, so much that she wanted him to know.

Allan arranged for Jamie and Angus to stay in the house, and he sent men to the ship, offering Jamie's men money for room and board in a nearby tavern. Before dinner, Hollie went to find Jamie, who was sitting in his new room.

"Congratulations on finding yer sister again," Hollie said.

He was startled by her presence, but he smiled.

"I haed no idea that she was still here!"

"What happened back then? How did ye get separated?"

"I was only a wee lad. Da said he was taking Lily out for a walk, and when he came back, she was nae with him. He said that she was somewhere safe and that we haed tae leave as well. At the time, I didnae understand what was happening. I didnae understand that they haed gotten intae debt with Antoine. We were just about tae leave, and then...then two men arrived at the door. Before I knew what was happening, they haed stabbed Ma and Da. They didnae see me. I was afraid that someone else would come. I ran out intae the night, and I never looked back. I hae been running ever since."

“Where did ye gae?”

Jamie shrugged. “I found work on the docks. A captain was generous enough tae take me on board. I learned the ways of the sea, and whenever I could, I asked about the man who killed my parents. I soon learned everything about him.”

“Did ye never look for Lily?”

“I assumed that she haed a better life than what I was left with. Besides, I haed tae find Antoine. I found the men who killed my parents, but that was nae enough. All my life, all I wanted was tae find him.” He choked on his own sorrow.

“And what now? Hae things changed now that ye hae found Lily?”

“I dinnae know. But I want tae get tae know her. I...I’m sorry for what I said on the boat. I didnae mean tae be harsh with ye. Ye hae tae understand that I hae nae lived a life like anyone else. All of this is unfamiliar tae me,” he said, gesturing around at the house.

“But it can be, Jamie. Perhaps this is where ye were always meant tae end up,” she suggested.

“Aye, perhaps,” he said, but she got the sense that he was still mired in confusion. The bell rang for dinner, and they went to enjoy the meal. Being at home again after being at sea for so long was strange for Hollie. She found herself wanting to sway as she had been used to the movements of the boat on the waves. The delicious food was a treat for her stomach as well. Anna and Charlotte giggled when she returned with Jamie. Hollie shot them a warning look. Thankfully, they kept their gossiping to themselves. Allan was interested to hear more about the adventure, and the group told their story from all their points of view. Allan gasped as he was told about how close they had come to death, and he apologized profusely for making the arrangement with Jacques in the first place.

“It was nae yer fault, Da,” Hollie reassured him. “Ye only wanted the best for me.”

Allan mopped beads of sweat off his head with his handkerchief. He nodded, but Hollie got the sense that this guilt would stay with him for a while. Despite being used to a life at sea, Angus and Jamie conducted themselves with politeness and did not make any coarse remarks. Seeing him sitting at the table proved to her that he could fit in here, and she was annoyed that he couldn’t see it himself. Why was he so determined to forge a life for himself on the waves when it was

cold and lonely, when it was devoid of anything approaching happiness? The world had punished him, but Jamie was doing a good job of punishing himself.

When dinner was over, Jamie excused himself and quickly retreated with Lily, asking for some time to get to know her better. Lily was eager to accept. Hollie was left with her sisters.

“Sae, the captain haes caught yer eye?” Charlotte said playfully, fluttering her eyelashes.

Hollie sighed. “Is it that obvious?” she asked.

“I’m afraid sae,” Anna said.

“Well, it matters nae. He only haes eyes for revenge. He doesnae see himself living in a place like this. He wants tae ride the wind until his dying day, and I dinnae think there’s anything I can say that would stop him.”

“Then ye should find some other way because a man like that doesnae come along often,” Charlotte said. “He’s *far* more handsome than Jacques was. That scar only adds tae his dashing looks. Ye are a lucky lass, Hollie.”

“And what dae ye hae tae say for yerself, Anna? Are ye gaeing tae warn me against haeing feelings for such an uncouth man?”

“I would never presume tae dae such a thing!” Anna feigned shock and placed her hands against her chest. “He does seem somewhat unrefined, but then again, that doesnae count for everything, as we saw with Jacques. I hae tae admit that he does resemble the men I read about. He’s sae strong, and all that ye hae been through...well...I wouldnae blame ye if ye wanted tae keep him around.”

The girls wore playful smiles. When Hollie remembered the good times they shared, she smiled too, and when she thought about the kiss, something powerful stirred within her heart. However, then she thought about the bitter tone of his voice when he spoke about revenge, and she worried that there was no room for anything but that in his heart.

“It doesnae matter anyway,” she sighed. “He’ll be gone soon enough because that’s the type of man he is.”

He would run away from this place just as he had fled from his own home as a child. But was he running toward something, or away?

JAMIE AND LILY were standing in a large room. Lily sat on the couch while Jamie remained standing.

“I know this cannae be easy for ye. I doubt ye remember anything about me,” he said.

“I dinnae, but I hae tae admit there was something about ye. When I looked at ye, I thought I knew ye. I put it down tae the nerves of being on the sea, but now I wish I haed thought about it properly. Did ye...did ye ever come and look for me?” she asked.

“I didnae. I didnae want tae make ye sad. I thought wherever ye ended up would hae been better than what happened tae me, and I was right. I’m glad that ye found a kind home and that they treated ye well.”

Lily nodded. “Aye, they did. When I grew older, they gave me a job. They were both kind tae me, but I hae always wondered about my own parents, about my life before this. What were they like?”

Jamie swallowed a lump in his throat. It had been a long time since he had spoken about his parents. For so long, they had existed only in his memory. He walked toward her and joined her on the couch. His body was rigid, and he leaned forward, perching on the edge. He clasped his hands together.

“Da was strong and funny. He used tae throw me in the air. Ma was soft and kind. I knew I would always be safe with her. That night...that night, she was incredibly sad, and now I knew why. I think she might hae known that she would never see ye again. She told me...she told me that I haed tae be strong. And then she was gone. She was...” His words were overwhelmed with sorrow, and he started to shudder. He had never let himself be this vulnerable with anyone before, but somehow it didn’t seem to matter, given that it was his sister.

The tears came out, as salty as the sea. They cascaded down, and his powerful body shuddered. Lily put her arm around him, and he relaxed into her embrace. She made soothing sounds as he released all the turbulent emotion that had been building up inside him ever since he had been a child. His head fell to her lap, and she stroked his hair. She started to hum a song as well, and then she began to sing. Her words were soft and lilting, and the melody was familiar to him. As the words came out, singing about the wind and the sea, he looked up.

“Where did ye learn that?” he asked.

Lily furrowed for a brow and thought for a moment, then she laughed slightly. "I dinnae really know. I suppose I hae always known it."

"It's something Ma used tae sing. I hae nae heard it for a long time. I hae nae heard it since..." He was unable to finish the thought. "I thought I would never hear it again."

"Well, ye hae. I suppose she must hae sung it tae me when she was nursing me."

"It's nice tae share it with ye, Lily."

"Aye, it's nice tae know I hae a family."

"Ye hae Allan and Hollie and the others."

Lily gave him a withering look. "While they hae been kind tae me, they are nae my true family. But ye are, Jamie. Please, will ye stay for a while? There's nothing calling ye back there."

Jamie rose back into a sitting position. "There is. Antoine."

"Antoine haes done enough damage. Because of him, we never knew what it was like tae grow up taegether. He's kept us apart all this time. If ye decide tae chase after him now, then ye are no better than him."

Her words were harsh, but he recognized the truth in them.

"And what about Hollie?" she added.

"What about her?"

A small chuckle escaped from Lily's lips. "I know the two of ye are fond of each other. Ye would be a fool tae walk away from her. She is a good lass, sae kind of heart. I hae known her all her life, and I hae never known her tae feel this way about anyone else. She can offer ye everything ye need...everything except revenge. I know ye are asking yerself how can there be more tae life than revenge, but there is. Ye can hae it all. Jamie, I intend tae marry Angus. Ye and Hollie could get married tae. Ye could stay here, and we could be here together. Our family could be complete again."

Jamie stared into space as he thought about the possibility of this actually coming true. He had always believed that these things were beyond his grasp, but now he started to think that perhaps he had been wrong all along. Following his heart had brought him here...was he going to be such a fool as to turn away when he was so close to something special? He had looked upon Jacques with disdain when he had ignored Hollie on the ship, so focused was Jacques on his studies,

but was Jamie any different if he focused on his revenge?

He thought about his parents again. Along with all the painful emotions that came with memories of their deaths, there was one that flowed through his heart, more powerful than any other. It was love. He remembered the love that he shared with his parents and the love they had for him. He spent his entire life running from that kind of love, and if he left now, he would be nothing more than a coward.

He found himself nodding, and he started to believe that there was more for him, more than he thought possible. A miracle had already occurred by finding Lily here. Perhaps it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that another might happen.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, everyone was having breakfast with each other. Hollie had decided that she was going to speak to Jamie again. During the voyage, she had worried about losing her life on many occasions, and each time, she always regretted not saying what had been on her heart. She wasn't about to let Jamie leave her with the same feeling. If he was going to leave, then she was going to make sure he left knowing exactly how she felt and how much she wanted him to stay. Lily seemed like a different person as well after having been the subject of this revelation. There was something calmer about her, something that felt more at ease. Hollie could only imagine what it was like for each of them to have found each other after all this time.

As breakfast was drawing to a close, Jamie cleared his throat and stood up, getting the attention of everyone.

"I wanted tae thank ye all for yer hospitality. I know this started by chance, but ye hae brought me taegether with my long-lost sister, and that is something I am always gaeing tae be grateful for. But there's something else as well... Allan, when I returned Hollie tae ye, ye said that ye are in my debt, that I could ask ye for anything. Well, I hae been thinking, and there is something I would like tae ask ye for," he said.

Hollie's heart clutched with tension at this. She wondered if he was going to ask for an entire fleet of ships with which he could hunt down Antoine, or perhaps he was going to ask to take Lily with him.

She was not prepared for what he was actually going to ask.

“I would like Hollie’s hand in marriage.”

A gasp rippled around the table. It took a moment or two for Hollie to actually believe what she was hearing. The proposal came out of nowhere, and she wondered what had happened to change his mind, but after everything she had been through, she couldn’t allow joy to enter her heart just yet. There had been other moments when she thought she knew what was on his mind, only for him to grow cold and distant directly afterward.

Allan wore a sheepish smile. “Well, I would be inclined tae agree, only that the last time I arranged a marriage, it didnae gae in Hollie’s favor. I think I would rather let her make her own choice,” he said, and Hollie wondered if he knew how much she appreciated that. Hollie managed to maintain a calm demeanor as she looked at Jamie.

“I thought the only thing ye cared about was revenge?” she asked, arching her eyebrows to appear aloof.

“I did, at least until I met ye, and until Lily reminded me about the importance of family.

“Hollie, I hae cared for ye ever since ye stepped foot on my ship. I tried tae protect ye, and ye came back. I healed yer wound, I saw how ye were treated by Jacques, and all I wanted was tae protect ye. I hae been chasing revenge all my life, and the only happiness it haes brought me is that it led me tae ye. I thought Jacques was a fool for nae appreciating ye, but if I leave now, then I’m even more of a fool.

“I want tae be with ye, Hollie. I want tae marry ye and prove tae ye that I can be worthy of ye. I want ye tae teach me how tae be a part of a family. I want tae live the life that my parents could nae.”

Emotion laced his words, and it grew more intense with every word he uttered, to the point where he was almost in tears. The ice around Hollie’s heart melted, and there was no way she could refuse his offer. She opened her arms to him and embraced him, and there was great rejoicing all around. Allan and Angus clapped while Lily beamed.

Charlotte turned to Anna. “Does this mean we hae tae get her another present?” she whispered.

But Hollie didn’t care. She was just glad to have this man finally be honest with her about his intentions, and his feelings. At first, she had been intrigued by the mystery surrounding him, but now that the

mysteries had been revealed, she was glad to know that she still felt strongly toward him. They kissed again, and happiness reigned in her heart.



THE WEDDING WAS SCHEDULED for a few days hence. Hollie was nervous as the day drew near, even though she didn't think she had any right to be. Invitations were sent to Jamie's crew. Angus and Lily were going to be married at the same time. As they got ready, Hollie and Lily shared their hopes and their fears, and Hollie personally thanked Lily for whatever she had said to Jamie to change his mind.

"I didnae think his mind needed changing," Lily said. "I think he just needed reminding about what's important in life and that he deserves tae be happy. I wanted tae thank ye as well, and I wanted tae say that I'm glad that after all this time, we're finally gaeing tae be family."

Hollie gave her a strange look. "Lily, dinnae be silly. Ye hae always been family tae me."

The women wore white, and they walked out of the house together as a minstrel played music on a lute. The gardens of the house were filled with guests as the brides walked toward their grooms. Their hands were joined together by rope, and they spoke sacred vows to their husbands while their husbands pledged their hearts to their brides.

This was the wedding that Hollie had dreamed of when she had first been sent away to be married, and she much preferred to get married in her home with her family around her rather than in France. Jamie was the kind of man she had always wanted to marry. He was a far better match than Jacques, and it hadn't required any effort on her part to conjure love within her heart. It had blossomed under its own power, as though it was its own force that coiled within her body and made its home within her soul. It was pure and real, and every time she looked at Jamie, she felt that same excitement stirring within.

There was much dancing, and the occasion was joyous. Jamie and Angus celebrated together, still together after all this time, as though they were destined to be by each other's side for the rest of their lives,

whether they were on a ship or not.

The merriment felt as though it was never going to end, but as much as Hollie was enjoying the feasting and the dancing, there was something else she wanted to do, something that had begun before and had not been finished.

Hollie crept up behind Jamie and placed her hand on the small of his back. He smiled when he saw her. She rolled forward onto her tiptoes and whispered something in his ear, and then his smile widened. They linked hands and disappeared into the house. The sounds of the party receded into the distance, and they were soon alone in Hollie's chamber. They closed the door behind them. Hollie lit a candle, illuminating the room in soft light, and then she stepped closer to Jamie. She placed a hand on his chest and looked up at him. The light of the candle danced within his eyes, inflamed by desire that stirred within. His hands slipped around her waist and pulled her close to him, as close as they had been when she had a dagger at his throat.

His lips parted, and she closed her eyes in sweet anticipation as their mouths met. Their breath swirled together, and the air crackled with heat. It was as though all the strength was sapped from her body, and yet there was some other force that swirled within her and made her stronger than she had ever been before. She could feel a fire blazing in the pit of her stomach, and she loved the tension that was growing in Jamie's body. She wrapped her arms around him and held onto him tightly as the kiss deepened. Their tongues began to dance.

She broke away, breathless, and turned around, indicating that she needed his help to undress. His fingers were deft, and he pulled away the corset and all the knots and straps that were holding her body prisoner in the fabric. A life at sea had prepared him for such a test. The dress slipped away and formed a puddle on the floor. She turned around coyly, displaying every inch of her naked femininity. Jamie looked as though he was in a dream. Breath rushed from his lungs, and he surged toward her, eager to touch her again, but she wagged a finger and instead started to undress him. It was unfair, of course, that she should be in such a state while he was still clothed.

As she peeled away his outfit, she became a witness to the pattern of scars that had been etched across his body. She traced them all with her fingers, running through the dark hair that spread across his torso.

Her throat tightened at the warmth emanating from him, at the sheer force of masculinity that sizzled in the air. Her mouth dropped open at the sight of his manhood, which was as impressive as the rest of him. He gathered her in his arms and kissed her again, then buried himself in her neck, breathing in her perfume. She arched her neck and let out a throaty laugh, loving the fact that Charlotte's gift was working its magic. They tumbled down and fell on the bed, which creaked under their weight, and they sank into its softness.

Jamie and Hollie rolled around—a tangle of hair and limbs and breathless kisses. It was impossible to tell where one of them ended and the other began. Jamie ended up on top of her. He kissed her deeply and looked into her eyes.

"Ye saved me from myself," he whispered, before catching her lips in another kiss.

His hands roamed around her body, his ardent fingers caressing the rising curves of her bosom. She shuddered as he found so many sensitive places that she had never known existed before. Her mind danced and whirled, as though it had a life of its own. Her breaths deepened, and sweat began to bead on her flawless skin. He left a trail of kisses all the way down her body, tracing a line along her stomach to her thighs before he started to make love to her with his mouth. The feelings were intense, and they danced through her body like a lightning bolt. Her back arched, and fervent moans soared into the air as she gripped the sheets of the bed. The pleasure was so intense it was almost painful, but she longed for more. It burned within her like a storm, and she loved every moment of it. She wondered how she had ever lived without this being a part of her life.

The raging, burning pleasure trembled and pulsed and thundered through her after threatening to rise and rise. Jamie seemed to be a master of her body, and she only hoped that she could make him feel as good.

He rose up and kissed her. She tasted her sweetness on his lips, and then she rolled him onto his back. She drifted down his muscular physique and breathed in his masculine musk as she kissed his manhood. It was like the ship's mast, tall and thick, and it was all hers. Instinct drove her, and she caressed it with her hands before placing her lips upon the tip and bringing it into her mouth, feeling the warmth surge within. She let his moans guide her, deeper and

deeper until the rhythm had him crying out with delight.

Strong hands pulled her away, and for a moment, she thought she had done something wrong, but Jamie just wanted to kiss her again. The tension in his body was rife, and she could feel him trembling. She shifted her position so that she was straddling him, her legs wrapped on either side of his body. She lowered herself down and felt a pinch of pain as they became one, but then her world shifted, and she felt everything go hazy. To steady herself, she placed her hands on his chest, and she could feel his heart beating under the surface. His hands were all over her, worshiping her beauty as they rocked back and forth. The bed creaked, and the world spun, and it was as though she was seeing things in an entirely new way. Pleasure rose and rose like a high wave, and then she found herself spinning as Jamie used his strength to place her on her back.

He kissed her wildly. He cradled her in his arms, and his weight was upon her, as though she was the only thing that mattered in the entire world. She lay her fingers against his back, feeling the sinews moving with the rest of his body, as though he was some great beast. His breaths were fervent, and she lost herself in him. Her toes curled with delight as she was locked in this passionate embrace, and the thunder came, rumbling from him to her in a shuddering blaze of pleasure and heat.

When it was over, Jamie brushed a few errant strands of hair away from her face. He looked deep into her eyes and said the words she had been longing to hear for so long.

“I love ye, Hollie.”

“I love ye tae.” They kissed and lay together, enjoying the quiet comfort of each other’s bodies as the pleasure dissipated from their flesh.



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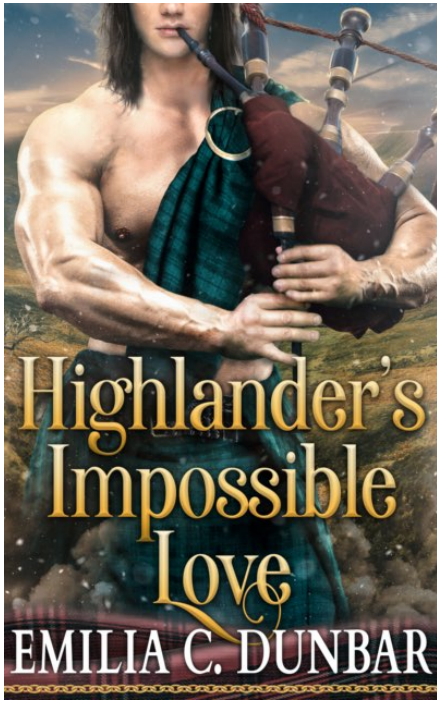
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Highlander's Impossible Love



Prologue

Annabel had been reading what she had hoped was a sonnet of romance, but it was so dull that it had lulled her into a doze. She was awakened by a loud thud as the small book fell from her lap onto the floor, and she jumped to her feet with a startled cry before shaking her head and giving a nervous laugh.

I am so clumsy!

The fire in the grate had gone out, and her bedroom was becoming chilly, so she rang for a chambermaid to come and put more logs on it before going to the window and looking out at the freshly fallen snow that had settled on the ground and the bare branches of the trees. It was like a drawing done in charcoal, stark in its brutal simplicity, and it made her feel sad.

Christmas and New Year had come and gone, and Annabel was looking forward to the appearance of her sister Janette, who had been visiting a close friend in Edinburgh. Janette had been due to arrive on Christmas Eve, but there had been no sign of her, or any word from her. The family had assumed that the atrocious weather had made the roads impassable, and it had been impossible to get a message to them. Hopefully, Janette had managed to lodge in an inn somewhere.

However, it was now the late afternoon on the fourth of January, and darkness was falling on another day without her sister. Annabel had not slept the night before, or she would never have fallen asleep in the middle of the day. She was by now seriously worried, afraid that she would never see her older sister's laughing merry brown eyes again or hear her infectious laugh, or pretend to be in pain due to one of Annabel's famously tight hugs. She physically ached for Janette; there was a sore spot above her heart, and she often found herself weeping.

Annabel was beginning to lose hope. She had stood at the window for hours, hoping to see the carriage carrying Janette bowling over the drawbridge. She had prayed furiously day after day for her sister's safe return, almost wearing her knees out in the process. And she had hardly eaten. Even the most delicious delicacy could not tempt her. She could not dismiss the fear that something was not right.

She sighed and poured a glass of whiskey, reflecting that she had been drinking far too much of it in the last few days. But it truly felt like the only way to calm down.



ANNABEL WAS ONCE MORE standing at her bedroom window when she saw a black-clad horseman approaching the drawbridge. He was moving very slowly, and as she watched him, her heart plummeted. She turned, left her room, and descended the stairs, not rushing in joyful anticipation of Janette's return, but treading slowly, dreading what she was about to discover.

The rider dismounted in the courtyard just as Annabel reached the last step. The rider came forward and bowed to her. He was a tall, powerful-looking man with stern gray eyes.

"Milady Chisholm?" the man asked. "I have a letter for your father."

"I will take you to him," she replied. Her heart was thundering in a wild tattoo. The letter contained bad news; somehow, she knew it. She had always had a sixth sense about these things, and now, as the guard handed over the letter and Annabel watched her father's face freeze in disbelief, then crumple in grief, her premonition was confirmed. He had always been a demonstrative man, given to expressing his feelings freely, and now he tipped his head back and let out a mighty howl of grief.

Annabel took the letter from his hand.

M'Laird Chisholm,

It is with deep regret that I must tell you that your daughter Janette has passed away. We had very thick snow, and she was hunting with my family and me in the woods around our castle when her horse stumbled

and she was thrown off. She hit her head on a boulder and died instantly without pain. We have interred her in our family crypt.

Please accept our deepest condolences, and if there is anything my family can do, please let us know.

Laird Keith McDonald

ANNABEL STARED AT THE LETTER, and for a moment, it seemed that her heart had stopped beating. She sank into a chair and began to weep. It was not real. Her sister could not be dead. She was the most lively and joyful person Annabel had ever known...

BUT THE LETTER did not lie. Annabel knew that the next time she saw Janette, they would be in heaven, and she hoped it would be soon.



DAYS AND DAYS of misery followed. Annabel's mother, Gunna, seemed to be holding up better than anyone, although Annabel knew that she kept her emotions hidden, although she suspected that she found release behind closed doors in the shelter of her father's arms. She had never seen two people who adored each other more than her parents. They had always been a fine example of what a marriage should be.

Gradually, Annabel became accustomed to the absence of the sister she had loved. It would not be easy to live life without her support and companionship, she knew, but as the weeks went on, the burden became lighter. On the first day of springlike weather, when the sun shone in a blue sky, she took off her black dress and changed it for a gray one. She still missed Janette terribly, but she could cope. Time did heal, and she did not have nightmares anymore or expect to see her sister sitting in the parlor sewing and smiling. Gradually, life was returning to as normal as it was possible to be without her sister.



"LAIRD MCKAY IS HERE TAE SEE ye," the butler informed John Chisholm as he sat in his office poring over his accounts on the bleakest day that winter offered that year. "He says ye're expectin'

him, M'Laird."

"Damn!" the laird grumbled. "Show him in." He had completely forgotten the appointment he had made with Janette's fiancé. He had no idea what business the man had with him, since his daughter was dead. There would be no marriage and no alliance between their clans, but the least he could do was receive him with civility. He contemplated his whiskey bottle but settled for wine. Something told him that he would need a clear head.

He stood up and went forward to shake hands with the man who had become a friend to him over the months he had been courting Janette. This was the first time that John Chisholm had seen his friend since her death, and meeting him again brought back happy memories, which, conversely, made him feel sad.

"M'Laird...how are you?" Findlay McKay asked sympathetically. "I have thought of you often since we last saw each other."

"As well as can be expected," John replied, sighing. "It is difficult to say goodbye to my most precious daughter, who I thought would outlive me by years."

The other man was tall and handsome with thick black hair and a dark mustache and beard. His eyes were a deep, dark gray that seemed to see into one's soul, and he had a habit of staring into a person's eyes without blinking, which made them deeply uncomfortable. Still, he was generous, kind, and moderately wealthy, and John had been happy when he and Janette became betrothed. However, that was in the past, and now there was no Janette, and therefore no marriage.

"My deepest condolences. If there is anything I can do for you, I would be happy to be of some help."

"Thank you, Findlay," John replied. "What brings you here?"

The man took a long pause, looking for the right words, and then replied, "I wanted to renew our acquaintance," he said while looking into John's eyes to see his reaction.

John knew right away what Findlay meant, but he urged him to continue with a small nod of his head.

"Little time has passed since Janette left us, but I wished to speak to you about your other daughter."

The laird frowned. "What about her?"

"She is of marriageable age," Findlay replied slowly and

cautiously. "And I wish to seek your permission to marry her. However, if you do not want me to, we will say no more about it, and there will be no hard feelings, of course." He smiled and accepted a glass of wine from John. "Thank you, my friend."

John gulped down his wine and began to pace the room, thinking. He turned to his friend again and found his penetrating eyes awaiting him.

"I admit that I was not prepared for this," John Chisolm admitted as he poured himself another glass of wine and sat down again, rubbing his bearded chin in agitation. "It seems to me that you want to replace one of my daughters with another." He narrowed his eyes. "If that is the case, then I must refuse because my girls are quite different in character. Janette was quiet, biddable, and kind, and I am not saying that Annabel is not kind, because she is. However, she is headstrong, stubborn, and she speaks her mind. She will not lead you to an easy life. Are you ready for this? I know you to be a tolerant man, but she is a great handful."

Findlay sighed and smiled. His voice was smooth like silk. By the initial reaction of John, he knew that he would be able to get what he wanted. "I have always liked Annabel for all the reasons you have just set forth," he replied, smiling. "She loves to ride, and that is something which we both enjoy doing, and I have heard that she is interested in charity work, for which I respect her immensely. She is never idle, and I admire anyone who is selfless enough to work for the good of their neighbor. You can like and respect more than one person, John, but I leave the decision in your hands."

John sighed, thinking of all the times he had seen Findlay and Janette together. He had always been solicitous and kind to her, and she had always looked happy. If Findlay McKay could make one of his daughters happy, then why not the other? He decided to summon Gunna.

His wife appeared a few moments later, wearing a plain dark gray mourning dress. She was a striking woman, with a tumble of red curls as yet untouched by silver and the same golden-hazel eyes as her daughters, but she was much shorter than they were. John had always thought of her as his doll.

She curtsied to Findlay, who stood up and bowed.

"Milady," he said fondly, "I trust you are well."

“Well enough, thank you, M’Laird,” she replied, sitting down and accepting a glass of wine from her husband. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

“I will come straight to the point, milady,” Findlay replied. “I wish to marry Annabel. She is a good woman, and I am already fond of her. I am not seeking to replace Janette, but our families are good friends, and I feel that we can make a good match.” He looked at her with his charming eyes for a moment. “But as I said to Laird Chisholm, the decision is yours.”

Gunna thought for a moment, then looked up at Findlay. “I think it would work out well,” she said, nodding. “As long as you bear in mind that Annabel is not like Janette in any way. Annabel is her father’s daughter in character, and Janette was mine.”

“So I have been told,” Findlay replied, smiling. He sipped his wine and fiddled with his gloves while Gunna and John conversed in low voices. He was even more nervous this time than he had been before he proposed to Janette.

At last, they turned to face him again.

“We both agree that the marriage is a good idea,” John said, smiling, “and that you will be a good match. I am sure that Annabel will think so too. Congratulations, M’Laird.”

“Thank you, John, Lady Gunna!” Findlay smiled widely. “I will make her a good husband.”

Chapter 1

Even if Annabel were in a good mood, she would not have liked

the news. But now she was really furious.

Her upcoming marriage first came to her knowledge when Annabel was sitting at supper one evening with her mother and father. It took several days for her appetite to come back, but she was especially hungry that night because she had been out riding in the fresh air and had eaten nothing until supper.

The chicken pie that she was eating was crumbly, moist, and oozing with delicious meat juices that were soon dripping from her chin. She had never been known for her table manners.

Presently, she looked up. Her parents had been ominously quiet throughout the meal, and she was puzzled. Her father pushed his plate away with half of his supper still on it. This was unheard of since he always ate heartily—and sometimes noisily—and never left a morsel.

He drank the rest of his wine in one gulp, then sighed and cleared his throat. “Annabel, there is something we need to tell you,” he said nervously.

Annabel felt her whole body stiffen, and she clenched her hands into fists under the table. Her well-developed sixth sense was telling her that she would not like what her father was going to say. Gunna had risen and poured her daughter a glass of whiskey, and this further enhanced her feeling of impending doom.

“Will someone speak?” she demanded with a full mouth. “You are scaring me.”

At last, the laird blurted out: “You are to be married, Annabel.”

“To whom?” she retorted instantly.

“To Laird McKay,” he replied.

“This is preposterous!”

“He is a good man, and—”

Annabel thumped both her fists on the table, glowering at her father. “I do not care if he is a saint!” she cried.

With that, she stood up and swept her plate, complete with her unfinished supper, off the table, turned her back, and rushed out of the room. The china crashed onto the floor, exploding into thousands of needle-sharp shards and splashing food everywhere.

“I will not marry him, and you cannot force me!” she roared, her face a thunderous mask of rage. “I will *never* marry the husband of my sister!” She turned and swept out of the room, leaving her parents to sit, looking after her in utter shock. They had expected defiance, but they had not expected fury.

“Wait ’til she cools down a little,” Gunna said soothingly as she looked at her husband’s startled countenance. “I will go and speak to her. This has been very sudden, and maybe we should have prepared her a little more.”

John nodded. “I am so bad with words,” he said heavily. “And a terrible father.”

Gunna put her arms around him. “You are the best father there ever was,” she said soothingly. “But you know what Annabel is like. It will take a few hours, or a few days, but she will think about it and eventually see reason. She is a sensible girl, even if she is a little hotheaded.”

John put his hands over his face. “I hope you are right, lovie,” he sighed. “She is so stubborn. I hope she sees that we have done the right thing.”



ANNABEL WAS BEYOND FURIOUS. As was her wont when she was upset, she went up to the topmost turrets of Castle Dunliesh to let the wailing wind howl past her ears and blow her hair into a wild tangle.

She had forgotten the rain; if she was wet, she could dry herself, and if she was cold, she could warm herself up. However, once she was married to McKay, she would be his, and no matter how kind, generous, and loving he was, no man would ever stir her soul as Kenneth did. Whatever bargain her parents had struck with Findlay McKay, they had done it without her consent.

She knew well that her consent was not needed for their betrothal, but if she declined in front of the priest, the whole contract was null and void. It would embarrass her parents and Laird McKay, but she could do nothing about that; now, she had to think of herself.

She stood on the turret for a long time, gazing down at the valley below and watching the lights come on in the tiny thatched cottages, letting the noise of the wind soothe her as it always did. Eventually, she felt calm enough and tired enough to make her way downstairs again. The first person she encountered was her mother.

Gunna held her hand out to her daughter, and Annabel took it. Gunna led her daughter into her private parlor and ordered some mulled wine. She was silent until it arrived, then looked Annabel in the eye and said quietly: "What is your objection to Laird McKay? He is a good man."

Annabel shook her head helplessly. "Mammy, she was going to marry my sister," she sighed and tried to run her hands through her hair, forgetting that it was hopelessly tangled. She winced and gave a loud moan of pain, and Gunna crossed the room to embrace her.

"You know, your father and I had an arranged marriage," she said softly. "We barely knew each other, but somehow we managed to fall in love and produce two beautiful daughters. You will be the same because you have the heart and spirit to make a marriage work, and so does Findlay. You have so much in common already."

"He likes to sew?" Annabel asked, her words dripping with sarcasm. "And play chess? And draw? He likes to cuddle kittens and play with dogs?" She leaped to her feet. "And will I be expected to go hunting with him? Dress up for ceilidhs to entertain people I despise? I will not do it, Mammy! I will not do it for him or any other man, because I have never seen a single one who is worthy of my time and attention!"

Gunna stood up to her full height of five feet and put her fists on her hips. There was a glint of steely determination in her eyes as she glared at her daughter. "Now listen to me," she growled, stepping forward to poke a finger in Annabel's chest, "because I have listened to you for long enough. You are the daughter of a noble family, as I was. I married your father because I had no choice, but neither did he. I had a duty, and I did it, just as you will, for your family. If you stand in front of Father David and say no, your father and I will be

humiliated, and so will Laird McKay and his family. You will marry him, Annabel, and there is no way around it. You will!"

Gunna's cheeks flamed with anger as she looked at her daughter. She had not meant to be so harsh, but Annabel was so stubborn.

With her heart sinking into her stomach, Annabel realized that what Gunna had said was true. She was trapped. She sighed and drained her wine.

"Very well, Mammy." Her voice was throbbing with barely contained fury. "I will do as you say. But do not expect me to like it."



Where is Kenneth when I need to speak to him?

Annabel thought of trying to make a secret assignation with him to tell him the news; perhaps then they could come up with a plan. She went to her chamber and locked the door, then took out a blank sheet of script. She gazed at the plain white surface for a long time, composing one letter after another in her mind and discarding each one before she began to write.

Dear Kenneth, she began, I have something to tell you that is of great importance to us both and I urgently need to see you. Perhaps we could—

No. She was about to suggest meeting him at the door of the church in the village, but it was too far to ride at nighttime, and even though most people were tucked safely indoors then, there was still the chance of being seen. She turned the paper over to write on the other side, since it was a scarce and expensive commodity, then began again.

Dear Kenneth, she wrote, something has happened that makes it vitally important that I see you as soon as possible. Please tell me where and when I can meet you.

She sighed, then began again with a fresh page. After having wasted four full sheets, she decided to give up. She had no intention of throwing away any more precious paper, and whatever she wrote did not convey the urgency of what she felt. She would not—could not—marry Laird McKay. He was a personable man, to be sure, and pleasing to look at. She had never heard any bad reports of his character. But he had one huge flaw: he was not Kenneth.

He did not have those deep green mesmerizing eyes, muscular

arms, and broad shoulders. He did not have the power to make her melt every time she looked at him, and he did not possess the deep husky voice that was sometimes caressing and sometimes commanding. For Annabel, Kenneth was everything a man should be, and she simply refused to compromise. He wanted her, and she wanted him, and nothing was going to stand in their way—and if anyone could make it happen, it was him.

She turned to the fireplace and threw the sheets of paper into the fire, bursting into tears. She resisted the urge to reach for the whiskey bottle, dried her tears, stood up and squared her shoulders, and went over her options.

No doubt Kenneth would be visiting in the next week or so. She did not know if he had heard about Janette's death, but she suspected that he had not. He had always been a soldier and was often away in the Lowlands, but when he came back, he spent as much time as he could with her since they had been friends for years. But he had many other responsibilities to the men who served with him, and for that, she respected him deeply, even though she missed him.

As she grew into womanhood, however, her feelings for Kenneth had blossomed into something deeper. She wanted to touch him, and she wanted to be wrapped in those strong arms, yet she had no idea why. Her mother was not the right person to ask about these things, but she could ask her maid, . Lorna was a widow who had lost her husband after a year of marriage, and she and Annabel had become as close as sisters in the short time they had been together.

As if her ears were burning, the door opened and Lorna came in with an armful of clean laundry. She smiled widely at her mistress, but then noticed the look on her face and frowned in concern. "What is wrong, Mistress Annabel?" she asked anxiously. "Ye look terrible!"

Annabel smiled sadly. "As well I should, Lorna," she sighed. "My father and mother have just told me that I am to be married to Janette's betrothed. Laird McKay."

Lorna frowned and put down the laundry on Annabel's silk-draped bed. "I understand, Mistress Annabel, but he seems tae be a good man," she said gently. "Can ye no' make the best o' it?"

Annabel shook her head. "No, Lorna," she said firmly. "He does not want me. He wants a wife, and worse, he thinks so little of my sister that he is immediately seeking her replacement. Everyone is

telling me what a good man he is, but I have no need of a good man, or any other type of man, and..." She trailed off, and looked down at her hands, which were twisting nervously in her lap.

Immediately, Lorna was by her side. "Look at me, mistress," she urged.

Annabel turned and looked into her maid's wide blue-gray eyes. One of the things she treasured about Lorna was her open affection, and she could see it shining out of them now. "I know nothing about what to do in the marriage bed. I cannot ask my mother, as she would be too embarrassed, and I feel so stupid." She covered her face with her hands.

Lorna felt an upwelling of pity for the woman she served but had come to regard as a close friend. "Would it surprise ye tae know that the same thing happened tae me? And tae many other young women. Come, sit down beside me, an' I will tell ye a' about it."

After Lorna had explained the details of what Annabel could expect on her wedding night, Annabel gazed at her, stunned. "And people like to do that?" she asked in disbelief.

Lorna nodded. "I did," she replied, "an' so will you, mistress."

"I hope you are right, Lorna," Annabel said faintly. "Please get me a glass of whiskey. I think I need one!"

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